

“UNDESERVED” GRADES OR “UNDERSERVED” STUDENTS? FACULTY ANXIETIES AND ERODING STANDARDS IN THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Unsustainable student debt and a precarious labor market continue to raise public doubts over the value of a college degree. Observers note decades of grade inflation, eroding confidence in academic standards. Yet little attention has been paid to the perceptions of professors themselves. This report fills the gap by surveying 223 tenured professors in U.S. public universities. We query faculty on sensitive questions central to debate over academic standards. Results show a substantial fraction of professors affirms the serious problems of grade inflation and declining standards. Moreover, political orientation is the best predictor of where faculty stand on these delicate questions. We close by encouraging viewpoint diversity in higher education and greater self-awareness among liberal faculty of our collective biases.

Keywords: faculty survey, corporatization, student entitlement, grade inflation, academic standards

Higher education has seen better days. As student debt approaches two trillion dollars, universities in the United States face greater scrutiny than ever before. Coupled with an ever-uncertain economic landscape, the national conversation over “diploma mills” (Ezell, 2020, p. 47) and “worthless degrees” (Quintana, 2019, para. 6) has reached a fever pitch. Indeed, every year we see a slew of new books addressing the fiscal, ideological, and civic implications of a university system in crisis (Bennet & Wilezol, 2013; Childress, 2019; Craig, 2018; Ginsberg, 2011; Nussbaum, 2016). The attacks on higher education cut across the political spectrum, from the baneful impacts of corporatization (e.g., Donoghue, 2018; Giroux, 2014; Schrecker, 2010) to claims of leftwing indoctrination (e.g., Ellis, 2021; Mac Donald, 2018; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). It is fair to say that few observers look to the future of higher education with optimism.

Arguably the most disturbing criticism of the institution is that it is failing in its central mission of educating students (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Côté & Allahar, 2011; 2007; Lindsay, 2014; Rojstaczer, 2016). Critics highlight a number of intersecting forces eroding academic standards, including severe financial constraints on universities as they scramble to attract and retain students, and an influx of more and more students either ill-prepared or unsuited for the rigors of university course work. The result has been decades of grade inflation, exacerbated by a culture of entitlement among students expecting high grades while putting in less and less work.

The reality of grade inflation or compression has been widely discussed (Denning et al., 2021; Johnson, 2006; Lindsay, 2014; Rojstaczer, 2016; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012), especially at elite institutions (e.g., Clarida & Fandos, 2013; Ferdman, 2013; Schrager, 2013). We will address the roots of the problem below, noting here that given the diverse demands on faculty’s time, especially the distinctive rewards tied to research, academic rigor in the classroom all too often takes a back seat. The result, in Kuh’s (2003) words, is a “disengagement compact,” (p. 28) where faculty “pretend to teach” and students “pretend to learn” (Collier, 2013, n.p.). The data on student disengagement confirms Kuh’s view on the student’s end (Burke et al., 2016; Côté & Allahar, 2007).

Despite the flurry of diagnoses of universities’ ills, little attention has been paid to the perceptions of professors themselves. Research that taps faculty attitudes tends to focus on particular case studies or problems (such as grade inflation or online instruction), without aspiring to a bird’s-eye view of faculty appraisals of higher education (e.g., Castillo, 2017; Lederman, 2019; Schroeder, 2016; Willis, 2017). We aim to do so in this report and center it around the following ideas: 1) Do professors perceive a decline in standards within the academy? If so, do they attribute it to such forces as corporatization, student entitlement, or increasing numbers of ill-equipped students? 2) Do faculty reveal their own participation in grade inflation or the reduction of rigor in their courses over the years? 3) Are professors optimistic or disillusioned about current conditions and future prospects for higher education? Which variables (discipline, gender, political orientation) might be associated with variation in their views?

We should stress that as an exploratory survey, our empirical aims are modest. We do reveal our anxiety about the facts on the ground – pressures we fear are gradually undermining academic standards. Yet apart from our perhaps distinctive

interpretation of these trends, we make no novel empirical claims about underlying causes. Nor are we hypothesis testing in any strict sense. Our method is to draw liberally from the higher education literature, attentive to conflicting claims and concerns that may bear on faculty's perceptions of academic standards.

Our report is inspired by our research team's prior surveys on scholarly debates within particular disciplines, including anthropology, economics, and sociology (Horowitz et al., 2018a; Horowitz & Hughes, 2018b; Horowitz et al., 2019). In those studies, we discovered that professors' political identity best predicts where they stand on controversies within their fields. Hence, we suspected here that political identity would be the most significant predictor of faculty's views of higher education controversies – a hunch borne out in the data, as we discuss below.

In any event, before turning to the survey, it is useful to take a deeper dive into the literature to provide context for our chosen questions. As we will see, the political fault lines of the debate over higher education crises could hardly be clearer.

THE “BROKE-WOKE-STROKE” CONVERGENCE

Examining a wide range of literature on higher education, we are struck by sustained attention to three intersecting forces. For ease of discussion, we dub these forces the “broke-woke-stroke” (BWS) convergence.¹ We identify the concepts here for fuller discussion below:

1) *Broke*.² This term captures the most prevalent diagnosis of higher education's woes today: severe revenue deficits as colleges compete to attract and retain students. State cutbacks in education since the 1980s, and consequent steadily rising tuition, have spurred increasingly unsustainable student debt. With rising for-profit competitors, and lower-cost online alternatives, universities have responded by deepening their commitment to business principles (i.e., corporatization). Associated trends include the rise in adjunct instruction and erosion of tenure, an amenities “arms race” to attract students, and increased evaluation (i.e., survival or elimination) of programs based on student enrollments. The anticipated demographic cliff and plunge in first-year student enrollments by mid-decade may already be expediting these processes.

2) *Woke*.³ This term captures a cultural trend, at least since the early 2010s, of heightened awareness and advocacy around racial and gender injustices in society. In the higher education context, the term is used as a pejorative by mostly conservative critics, who denounce what they see as a radical campus climate inimical to the values of meritocracy, free speech, and colorblindness. Critics highlight instances of *cancel culture*, where speakers have been censored or

¹ Though perhaps cheeky, we find the heuristic value of this rhyming phrase especially helpful for recall of the trends affecting higher ed.

² For literature on “broke” themes, see, e.g., Childress (2019); Craig (2018); Donoghue (2018); Carey (2016); Giroux (2014); Williams (2012); Schrecker (2010).

³ For literature on “woke” themes, see, e.g., Ellis (2021); Herman (2021); Saad (2020); Murray (2019); Mac Donald (2018).

professionally harmed for taking positions contrary to prevailing leftwing sentiment. Among such taboo positions is the minimization or denial of White supremacy, acknowledgment, or pride in uniquely positive contributions of Western civilization, or the claim that racial/ethnic disparities in educational or other outcomes can be attributed to group differences in culture, behavior, or ability.

3) *Stroke*.⁴ This term loosely captures generational changes associated with the perception of heightened student entitlement and fragility. Here, faculty may feel compelled to stroke the egos, as it were, of students they view as increasingly likely to push back for higher grades, and others too vulnerable for stringent appraisals of their work. Associated cultural underpinnings include helicopter and overindulgent parenting (“everyone’s a winner”); an accompanying victimization culture (with attendant emphases on microaggressions, trigger warnings, and safe spaces); a spirit of educational romanticism, where all students are deemed capable of academic success with enough support provided; and a consumerist ethos where good grades are expected as a return on students’ financial investment, whatever their objective performance.

These brief sketches by no means comprise the myriad threads of an expansive discussion on higher education. Nor are there fine boundaries between these trends, as they overlap and reciprocally reinforce each other. Yet the point we wish to stress – and here we put our cards on the table regarding our principal concern in the survey – *this triad of forces in no way fosters institutional incentives to uphold academic standards*. In fact, we worry that this elective affinity is cultivating a campus ethos outright antithetical to rigor⁵.

We recognize, of course, that faculty reading this may not share our concern or perceive an erosion in standards. Perhaps our pessimism is unfounded. Hence, this report. We aim to invite wider conversation on these matters by empirically informing, albeit via a modest survey, richer self-understanding of our diverse views as a professoriate.

It should be noted that our pessimism is anchored in part in our shared experience in academia (78 years among us, at 11 different institutions), reinforced by our read of the literature above. Rojstaczer and colleagues’ (2016) work demonstrates a spike in college grades in the sixties and a steady increase since the eighties, with the number of A grades going up 5-6 percentage points per decade. As Lindsay (2014) points out, A grades are now the most common grade assigned in college courses, at 43 percent, compared to 15 percent in the 1960s. We share these authors’ skepticism about attributing such grade inflation to students’ improved preparation or mastery of college material. If anything, we are inclined to agree with Côté and Allahar’s (2011) sobering assessment of the corporate university, explaining the problem in terms of

⁴ For literature on “stroke” themes, see, e.g., Lukianoff and Haidt (2019); Campbell and Manning (2018); Twenge (2017; 2014); Zarra (2019); Murray (2008).

⁵ Culling the phrase from Goethe, the sociologist Max Weber conceptualized elective affinities as historically contingent conjunctures where partially autonomous ideal and material forces mutually reinforce each other in socially consequential ways.

financial exigency and the “democratization” of higher education. (p. 11). Although they focus principally on Canada, the *college-for-all* creed in the United States implies particular relevance here. If this view is correct, the material factor (“broke”) is likely the main driver of grade inflation, as cash-strapped universities tap an ever-larger market of students expected to go to college, whatever their preparation or intellectual readiness.

We cannot emphasize enough that our view is fundamentally structural, not agential. We suspect few *villains* behind the scenes, whether bloated administrators bent on exploiting adjuncts, or pampered professors lowering standards to evade hard work. Indeed, the threat to standards today strikes us as a problem of incentives, anchored in contemporary political-economy and culture. If financial pressures on universities incentivize contingent hiring (and, perhaps, relaxed admissions standards), might such pressures bear on faculty who know their bread is buttered by plump course enrollments and satisfied student-consumers? Indeed, the current *consumer model* of higher education has coincided with the use of teacher evaluations by students increasingly anxious (reasonably so) about their mounting debt and future employment. In this context, Rojstaczer (2016) notes, students expect good grades because “the customer is always right.” Intellectual rigor declines, he adds, as professors are “compelled” to “water down” their courses (para. 40).

The situation is especially distressing as we have experienced numerous situations over the years where a *moral* case could be made for passing students through. Encountering students with serious reading and writing deficits in their final year, for example, invites a Hobson’s choice of perpetuating relaxed standards or forcing students to incur further debt and delay. Compassion for students’ financial circumstances is only natural (and heightened, to be sure, during the pandemic). Add to this the “woke-stroke” cultural forces mentioned above, and we do not see strong enticements for rigor. For instance, low grades or drop-out rates for disadvantaged students, especially students of color, are becoming increasingly politicized. Universities are noticing disparities in student outcomes, which are often attributed to systemic racism or implicit biases. To cite an example, in a 2020 statement titled “Enacting an Anti-Racist Agenda,” the President of Brooklyn College stresses a commitment to addressing the “structural obstacles” faced by students of color, with funds for “professional development” of faculty with the “highest racial disparities in outcomes and the highest D/F/W rates” (Brooklyn College, 2020, para. 7). In a highly publicized case, a Georgetown University law professor, Sandra Sellers, was fired after accidentally recording a Zoom call with a colleague where she discussed grading. Students protested after hearing Sellers inartfully state “I end up having this angst every semester that a lot of my lower ones are Blacks — happens almost every semester. And it’s like, ‘Oh, come on.’ You know? You get some really good ones. But there are also usually some that are just plain at the bottom. It drives me crazy” (as cited in Barnes, 2021, para. 4).

We cite these cases not to endorse or denounce them, but to highlight that the racially sensitive climate in universities today may be an additional factor contributing to grading pressure. We are less concerned about occasional instances that gain national attention than the everyday normative atmosphere from which such cases arise. It is unsurprising in this atmosphere to see budding challenges to the very

notion of academic rigor. Writing in *The Chronicle*, for instance, Jack and Sathy (2021) – in an essay titled “It’s time to cancel the word, ‘rigor’” – advocate for more structured course assignments and “inclusive teaching” methods. The authors cite literature on the “hidden curriculum” that “privileges” those with “high academic literacy.” Apparently, it may not be “fair or valid” to hold students to such “normative expectations” as “reading,” “arriving to class on time,” “participating in discussion,” or using “standard English” (Boston University, 2021).⁶

In sum, might pressure on program enrollments, increasing numbers of ill-equipped students, compassion for the economically disadvantaged, fear of pushback by entitled students or charges of bias for grading disparities, and the need for positive teaching evaluations, all conspire to a lowering of standards? Any of these factors viewed in isolation may seem insignificant. But we worry that the BWS convergence has germinated slowly over the years, imparting a tacit or taken-for-granted lowering of academic expectations.

Let us turn now to our survey to explore whether faculty across the country share these concerns.

METHODS

Sample Selection and Survey

Our operating principle as we selected our sample was to approximate as closely as possible the typical higher education experience in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are 3982 degree-granting colleges and universities in the U.S., with far more students enrolled in public than in private institutions. Indeed, in 2019-2020, there were 13 million undergraduate students enrolled in public institutions, 2.8 million in private nonprofit institutions, and 758,600 students in for-profit institutions (NCES, 2021). With these facts in mind, we limited our sample to large, public universities with at least 10,000 enrolled students. We chose universities of “average” selectivity as well (between a 50-80 percent acceptance rate), with a common demographic profile. Hence, we excluded institutions with student bodies more than 80 percent White or another single ethnicity.

Given widespread alarm today regarding students’ alleged deficits in writing and math, we chose to survey faculty in the departments of English and mathematics. We added sociology as well to have programs across the hard and soft sciences and humanities. Given our interest in professors’ potentially changing perceptions throughout their careers, we targeted faculty at the associate and full ranks, as tenure track faculty have a narrower time horizon. We recognize, of course, the limits to generalizability of our sample. And we certainly encourage investigation of faculty attitudes across a wider range of fields and institutions, including at elite universities, community colleges, and for-profit institutions.

⁶ See Randall, 2021 for a biting counterpoint to Jack and Sathy.

To select our schools, we employed the NCES College Navigator (https://nces.ed.gov/college_navigator/). We grouped the country into four geographical regions (New England/Mideast, Great Lakes/Plains, Southeast/Southwest, Rocky Mountains/Far West), randomly selecting ten universities from each region that fit our criteria, for a total of 40 universities. Accessing publicly available departmental websites, and eliminating repeating, returned, or unverifiable emails, we sent the survey to 2344 professors. After an initial email and follow-up in Fall 2021, we received a total of 223 usable surveys, for about a 10 percent response rate.⁷

Substantively, we organized the questions around three broad thematic categories: 1) academic standards and dilemmas; 2) role demands and morale; and 3) diversity, meritocracy, and mission. Table 1 lists the survey items. Table 2 provides the sample characteristics.

Table 1: Survey Items

ID	Category
	Academic Standards and Dilemmas (ASD)
ASD1	Grade inflation is a serious problem in higher education today.
ASD2	Academic standards have declined in undergraduate education in recent years.
ASD3	Student pushback regarding grades has increased in recent years.
ASD4	Universities on the whole are succeeding in enhancing students' skills/competencies
ASD5	The corporatization of higher education is a serious problem.
ASD6	I suspect that students are studying just as many hours today as they did when I first began teaching.
ASD7	Too many students are admitted to university today who are not intellectually suited.
ASD8	I would not be surprised if there are some functionally illiterate students graduating from my university.
ASD9	Grade inflation has reflected in part an overall improvement in the preparedness or abilities of students.
ASD10	Encouragement of a four-year degree to all students, whatever their ability or preparedness, has played some role in the erosion of standards in higher education.
ASD11	Faculty know where their bread is buttered. Grade inflation is largely due to the need to keep their programs financially viable.

⁷ We informed respondents that the survey is anonymous (with IP addresses not saved on SurveyMonkey) and that they may skip any questions or exit the survey at any time. The controversial nature of the questionnaire likely contributed to our modest response rate. We infer this based on a host of unfriendly comments by respondents (discussed below), as well as the 74 entrants who exited the survey without answering a single question. Bearing this in mind, we suspect some self-selection bias in favor of sympathizers to the survey's themes, though we are unable to verify.

Table 1 (continued)

ASD12 The watering down of courses in recent years is doing a disservice to more academically gifted students.

Role Demands and Morale (RDM)

RDM1 As student teacher evaluations more often measure a professor's popularity or ease than rigor, they should not be used as a metric in tenure and promotion decisions.

RDM2 Whatever their imperfections, student teaching evaluations are an appropriate metric for faculty tenure and promotion decisions.

RDM3 I find myself watching what I say on campus (i.e., self-censoring) more and more in recent years.

RDM4 Concerns about "cancel culture" or the erosion of faculty members' free speech are overblown.

RDM5 Over time, faculty involvement in assessment practices (i.e., recurrent discussions over learning outcomes, closing the loop) enhances student learning.

RDM6 The assessment movement in higher education is misguided.

RDM7 Over the years I have found myself playing a more emotionally supportive (if not therapeutic) role with students.

RDM8 Faculty should in no way be held responsible for students in their classes who are unmotivated to learn the material they are teaching.

RDM9 I routinely give grades that are higher than I believe students merit.

RDM10 I inflate grades at least in part because I don't want to lose enrollment in my courses.

RDM11 I inflate grades at least in part because I want to avoid the headaches associated with student pushback.

RDM12 I feel pressure from the administration or my department to inflate grades.

RDM13 I have reduced the difficulty or demands of my courses over the years.

RDM14 I have felt frustrated by colleagues who routinely give A's to their students.

RDM15 I have never worried about the distribution of grades in my courses by race/ethnicity.

RDM16 I'm sensitive to students' different learning styles when developing course assignments.

RDM17 It's demoralizing to participate in a declining-standards credential mill, but my livelihood depends on it.

RDM18 The fulfillment I experience in my role as professor has declined over the years.

RDM19 I at least sometimes feel that a four-year liberal arts degree today is a gift.

RDM20 I am optimistic about the future of higher education.

Table 1 (continued)

Diversity, Meritocracy, and Mission (DMM)

- DMM1 Due to differential treatment in college, such as implicit or explicit biases, marginalized students of color often have to perform stronger academically than more privileged students to earn the same grades.
- DMM2 Racial/ethnic disparities in students' academic performance are due in no small part to systemic racism within universities.
- DMM3 I wouldn't be surprised if marginalized students of color tend to be graded more leniently than more privileged students in university today.
- DMM4 I worry that the laudable goal of reducing racial disparities in student outcomes is undermining expectations regarding math competency in college.
- DMM5 Given the importance of affirming diverse cultural backgrounds or learning styles, student competence in conventional English should not be factored significantly into their grades for written work.
- DMM6 The underrepresentation of minority faculty in universities today is largely due to (often subtle) processes of discrimination in the hiring and tenure processes.
- DMM7 The underrepresentation of minority faculty in universities today is largely due to a lack of enough qualified applicants, not discrimination in the hiring or tenure processes.
- DMM8 I support the increased emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on campus in recent years.
- DMM9 Virtually all students admitted with serious academic deficits can excel in a challenging curricular environment with sufficient academic and university support.
- DMM10 The elimination of standardized testing for admission to college is a positive development.
- DMM11 Standardized tests, such as the SAT, are culturally discriminatory, if not racist.
- DMM12 In the interest of students' mental health, we should move toward eliminating grades altogether.
- DMM13 Students should be tested earlier to assess whether they are better suited for a vocational rather than a four-year university path.
- DMM14 Academic programs should be assessed for their marketability, and if necessary eliminated, if students complete their degrees with few to no viable job opportunities.
- DMM15 The civic mission of the university – to foster students' capacity to participate robustly in our democracy – is at least as important as the university's mission to purvey viable job skills.
- DMM16 Regardless of job prospects or what the market values, we should as a society collectively pay for broadly accessible and inexpensive four-year college opportunities for all.
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Table 2: Sample Characteristics

TOTAL	Respondents N=223	Percent 100
Gender		
Female	74	35
Male	135	65
Age		
30-45	57	28
46-61	95	47
62+	50	25
Discipline		
English	99	45
Mathematics	64	29
Sociology	55	25
Academic Rank		
Associate Professor	82	38
Professor	132	62
Political Orientation		
Radical	26	12
Liberal	130	61
Moderate	46	21
Conservative	9	4
Libertarian	4	2

Note: Table leaves out a modest number of missing cases across categories

Respondents were asked Likert-type items, i.e., whether they “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree” with the 48 statements. As formulating questions on controversial matters often invites objections, we provided comment boxes under each item. Note that there are several items where we “presume the premise” (ASD10, ASD12, RDM10, RDM11, RDM17) to aid readability, given the survey’s length (i.e., to avoid repeated breaks such as “If YES, please respond to questions x^i , x^{ii} ; If NO...”). And one item in particular (RDM17) was viewed by some respondents as unduly loaded. Given our interest in faculty morale, we occasionally use the same charged language (“declining-standards credential mill”) that appears in current commentary over higher education. The related term, “diploma mill,” for example, appears over half a million times in a Google search.

We are cognizant, of course, that our questions reflect our own necessarily partial standpoints. And we did strive, when possible, to frame statements affirmatively from different sides of the controversy. We hope, in any event, that the striking patterns in the data prove useful as we contemplate, as a professoriate, the changes deeply impacting our profession and society broadly.

FINDINGS

Table 3 reports descriptive statistics of the sample as a whole. As space prevents us from attending to every item, we will focus on central survey themes and takeaways.

Table 3: Distribution of Responses

Survey Item	Item Descriptions	N	Percent Agree/Disagree*
Academic Standards and Dilemmas			
ASD1	Grade inflation is a serious problem in higher education	220	48/21
ASD2	Academic standards have declined in recent years	220	47/27
ASD3	Student pushback regarding grades has increased	221	37/29
ASD4	Universities are succeeding in enhancing skills	220	63/19
ASD5	Corporatization of higher education is a serious problem	221	79/08
ASD6	Students are studying just as many hours today	220	34/40
ASD7	Too many students are not intellectually suited	220	38/40
ASD8	Some functionally illiterate students are graduating	220	40/47
ASD9	Grade inflation reflects improvement in student preparedness	218	10/58
ASD10	Encouraging four-year degree plays role in eroding standards	217	49/31
ASD11	Grade inflation due to need to keep programs financially viable	217	33/41
ASD12	Watering down courses does disservice to gifted students	214	49/33
Role Demands and Morale			
RDM1	Student evaluations should not be used for tenure and promotion	217	56/21
RDM2	Student evaluations are appropriate metric for tenure	216	30/55
RDM3	I self-censor on campus more and more in recent years	217	59/27
RDM4	Concerns over “cancel culture” and free speech are overblown	217	33/46

Table 3 (continued)

RDM5	Assessment practices enhance student learning	216	45/29
RDM6	Assessment movement is misguided	214	56/15
RDM7	I am playing a more emotionally supportive role with students	218	59/16
RDM8	Faculty not responsible for unmotivated students	217	46/31
RDM9	I routinely give grades higher than students merit	217	37/46
RDM10	I inflate grades because I don't want to lose enrollment	215	12/76
RDM11	I inflate grades to avoid student pushback	216	30/57
RDM12	I feel pressure by department or administration to inflate grades	217	22/58
RDM13	I have reduced the difficulty of my courses over the years	217	33/45
RDM14	I have felt frustrated by colleagues who routinely give A's	216	31/45
RDM15	I have never worried about grade distribution by race/ethnicity	216	49/39
RDM16	I am sensitive to students' different learning styles	217	65/21
RDM17	Demoralizing participating in declining-standards credential mill	213	30/43
RDM18	The fulfillment I experience as professor has declined	215	34/53
RDM19	I sometimes feel liberal arts degree is a gift	214	23/57
RDM20	I am optimistic about the future of higher education	215	24/45
Diversity, Meritocracy, and Mission			
DMM1	Due to biases, students of color have to perform stronger	212	34/44
DMM2	Racial/ethnic disparities due to systemic racism	212	46/31
DMM3	Students of color tend to be graded more leniently	210	23/52
DMM4	Reducing racial disparities undermining expectations in math	211	23/41
DMM5	Conventional English should not be significant factor in grading	206	10/75

Table 3 (continued)

DMM6	Minority underrepresentation due to discrimination	212	46/41
DMM7	Minority underrepresentation due to lack of qualified candidates	211	49/32
DMM8	I support equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives	213	77/12
DMM9	Virtually all students with academic deficits can excel with support	213	47/35
DMM10	Elimination of standardized testing is a positive development	212	51/30
DMM11	Standardized tests are cultural discriminatory, if not racist	213	44/28
DMM12	For students' mental health, we should move away from grades	213	13/65
DMM13	Students should be tested earlier for vocational or university path	211	33/46
DMM14	Programs should be eliminated if few to no job opportunities	213	09/81
DMM15	Civic mission of university as important as job skills	212	85/07
DMM16	Regardless of market, society should pay for affordable college	212	75/13

First, although there are a few areas of strong consensus, respondents are generally mixed in their positions across the large majority of questions. On only 21 items, for example, do we see a majority of professors agree. Moreover, on half of the items, more than a fifth mark “neither agree nor disagree,” suggesting appreciable ambivalence on these matters.

What strikes us as telling, however, is that despite the sensitivity of the questions, substantial fractions of the professoriate affirm the serious problems of grade inflation and eroding standards, as well as their role in them. Here are some highlights:

- 48% agree that grade inflation is a serious problem vs. 21% who disagree (ASD1)
- 47% agree that academic standards have declined vs. 27% who disagree (ASD2)
- Only 10% affirm that grade inflation reflects improvement in students' abilities or preparedness (ASD9)
- 37% admit to routinely inflating grades (RDM9)
- 33% admit to reducing the rigor of their courses over the years (RDM13)
- 30% agree that they are “demoralized” participating in a “declining-standards credential mill” (RDM17)
- 23% admit to sometimes feeling the four-year liberal arts degree is a “grift” (RDM19)

These findings suggest that we (the authors) are not alone in our worries about the direction of higher education. Of course, the import of the numbers is debatable. A more upbeat observer might emphasize the majorities of faculty who do *not* divulge a reduction in rigor or view the university as a credential mill. And in an instance of majority agreement, 63% of faculty affirm that universities are succeeding in enhancing students' skills and competencies (ASD4).

Turning to the factors that may contribute to eroding standards, we see discernable recognition of BWS forces among faculty:

- Fully 79% agree that “corporatization” is a serious problem in higher education vs. only 8% who disagree (ASD5)
- 49% affirm that encouraging a four-year degree to all has played a role in declining academic standards (ASD10)
- 38% agree that too many students in university are not intellectually suited (ASD7)
- 40% do not suspect that students are studying as much as they did in the past (ASD6)
- 37% agree that student pushback on grades has increased in recent years (ASD3)
- 59% affirm playing a more emotionally supportive (if not therapeutic) role with students over the years (RDM7)
- 56% believe that student evaluations should not be used for tenure and promotion decisions (RDM1)

In only one of the seven items above is there a (slight) plurality of faculty in disagreement (ASD7, 40%). Hence, although we tend to see pluralities rather than majorities on several of the items, there is substantial evidence that professors perceive declining standards and attribute it in no small part to BWS trends.

We will supplement the quantitative findings with attention to professors' comments in the discussion below. But let us turn first to the variation in the data.

PROFS AND PATTERNS

Tables 4, 5, and 6 report responses by academic discipline, gender, and political orientation. These descriptive tables are helpful in providing baselines with regard to where the various groupings stand on the survey items. Reading them in tandem with our regression models in Tables 7, 8, and 9 captures the meaning and statistical significance of the salient patterns.

Table 4: Distribution of Responses by Academic Programs

Survey Item	Item Descriptions	N	English (% agree/disagree)	Math (% agree/disagree)	Sociology (% agree/disagree)
Academic Standards and Dilemmas					
ASD1	Grade inflation is a serious problem in higher education	217	40/31	53/16	56/09
ASD2	Academic standards have declined in recent years	217	38/42	59/16	48/13
ASD3	Student pushback regarding grades has increased	218	39/32	31/27	36/35
ASD4	Universities are succeeding in enhancing skills	217	68/21	56/19	67/16
ASD5	Corporatization of higher education is a serious problem	218	91/03	66/14	75/11
ASD6	Students are studying just as many hours today	217	36/37	36/36	31/49
ASD7	Too many students are not intellectually suited	217	31/54	53/22	33/36
ASD8	Some functionally illiterate students are graduating	217	36/51	45/39	43/48
ASD9	Grade inflation reflects improvement in student preparedness	215	11/50	12/58	05/75
ASD10	Encouraging four-year degree plays role in eroding standards	214	35/45	65/13	55/27
ASD11	Grade inflation due to need to keep programs financially viable	214	31/49	39/24	31/46
ASD12	Watering down courses does disservice to gifted students	211	37/46	67/21	49/25

Table 4 (continued)

Role Demands and Morale					
RDM1	Student evaluations should not be used for tenure and promotion	214	57/21	59/17	51/25
RDM2	Student evaluations are appropriate metric for tenure	213	24/60	37/42	29/51
RDM3	I self-censor on campus more and more in recent years	214	60/29	56/16	60/36
RDM4	Concerns over “cancel culture” and free speech are overblown	214	42/41	23/53	29/44
RDM5	Assessment practices enhance student learning	213	46/32	41/21	44/35
RDM6	Assessment movement is misguided	211	60/16	50/08	56/22
RDM7	I am playing a more emotionally supportive role with students	215	63/15	53/17	60/16
RDM8	Faculty not responsible for unmotivated students	214	46/33	62/19	29/40
RDM9	I routinely give grades higher than students merit	214	33/52	34/47	49/33
RDM10	I inflate grades because I don't want to lose enrollment	212	10/76	13/76	16/76
RDM11	I inflate grades to avoid student pushback	213	25/58	25/60	44/49
RDM12	I feel pressure by department or administration to inflate grades	214	16/74	38/50	16/78
RDM12	I feel pressure by department or administration to inflate grades	214	16/74	38/50	16/78
RDM13	I have reduced the difficulty of my courses over the years	214	37/47	47/41	49/44
RDM14	I have felt frustrated by colleagues who routinely give A's	213	32/49	38/33	24/50

Table 4 (continued)

RDM15	I have never worried about grade distribution by race/ethnicity	213	39/48	70/19	44/44
RDM16	I am sensitive to students' different learning styles	214	75/13	42/33	75/22
RDM17	Demoralizing participating in declining-standards credential mill	210	27/51	36/39	30/41
RDM18	The fulfillment I experience as professor has declined	212	33/59	30/52	42/42
RDM19	I sometimes feel liberal arts degree is a gift	211	19/67	35/37	19/60
RDM20	I am optimistic about the future of higher education	212	21/51	29/37	24/47
Diversity, Meritocracy, and Mission					
DMM1	Due to biases, students of color have to perform stronger	209	45/29	11/66	40/45
DMM2	Racial/ethnic disparities due to systemic racism	209	60/17	20/51	49/33
DMM3	Students of color tend to be graded more leniently	207	14/63	35/38	26/54
DMM4	Reducing racial disparities undermining expectations in math	208	10/43	48/34	19/46
DMM5	Conventional English should not be significant factor in grading	203	14/74	07/69	06/80
DMM6	Minority underrepresentation due to discrimination	209	60/29	22/57	47/44
DMM7	Minority underrepresentation due to lack of qualified candidates	208	31/44	68/15	56/31

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Table 4 (continued)

DMM8	I support equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives	210	87/05	64/23	73/13
DMM9	Virtually all students with deficits can excel with support	210	60/24	30/51	47/35
DMM10	Elimination of standardized testing is a positive development	209	65/21	28/44	54/28
DMM11	Standardized tests are cultural discriminatory, if not racist	210	70/15	26/46	56/27
DMM12	For students' mental health, we should move away from grades	210	19/52	05/82	15/67
DMM13	Students should be tested for vocational or university path	208	27/50	47/37	28/48
DMM14	Programs should be eliminated if few to no job opportunities	210	04/89	16/69	11/80
DMM15	Civic mission of university as important as job skills	209	95/01	64/18	91/04
DMM16	Regardless of market, society should pay for affordable college	209	87/06	56/21	76/17

Note: Percentages rounded and collapsed Agree/Strongly Agree and Disagree/Strongly Disagree

Table 5: Distribution of Responses by Gender

Survey Item	Item descriptions	N	Women (% agree/ disagree)	Men (% agree/ disagree)
Academic Standards and Dilemmas				
ASD1	Grade inflation is a serious problem in higher education	208	41/24	40/21
ASD2	Academic standards have declined in recent years	208	35/43	50/20
ASD3	Student pushback regarding grades has increased	209	41/28	35/30
ASD4	Universities are succeeding in enhancing skills	208	66/16	64/18
ASD5	Corporatization of higher education is a serious problem	209	91/05	74/10
ASD6	Students are studying just as many hours today	208	38/35	35/40
ASD7	Too many students are not intellectually suited	208	30/59	41/33
ASD8	Some functionally illiterate students are graduating	208	35/52	42/46
ASD9	Grade inflation reflects improvement in student preparedness	206	11/60	09/56
ASD10	Encouraging four-year degree plays role in eroding standards	205	38/43	55/27
ASD11	Grade inflation due to need to keep programs financially viable	206	27/53	35/38
ASD12	Watering down courses does disservice to gifted students	202	33/44	54/29
Role Demands and Morale				
RDM1	Student evaluations should not be used for tenure and promotion	205	59/20	53/23
RDM2	Student evaluations are appropriate metric for tenure	205	20/65	34/47
RDM3	I self-censor on campus more and more in recent years	205	54/32	61/25
RDM4	Concerns over “cancel culture” and free speech are overblown	205	37/47	33/46
RDM5	Assessment practices enhance student learning	204	51/30	40/30

Table 5 (continued)

RDM6	Assessment movement is misguided	202	57/16	53/16
RDM7	I am playing a more emotionally supportive role with students	206	76/12	50/18
RDM8	Faculty not responsible for unmotivated students	205	28/39	53/29
RDM9	I routinely give grades higher than students merit	205	36/51	38/44
RDM10	I inflate grades because I don't want to lose enrollment	204	06/85	15/73
RDM11	I inflate grades to avoid student pushback	205	32/58	27/58
RDM12	I feel pressure by department or administration to inflate grades	205	21/74	22/69
RDM13	I have reduced the difficulty of my courses over the years	205	37/51	44/42
RDM14	I have felt frustrated by colleagues who routinely give A's	204	32/49	31/44
RDM15	I have never worried about grade distribution by race/ethnicity	204	41/48	52/36
RDM16	I am sensitive to students' different learning styles	205	88/05	53/30
RDM17	Demoralizing participating in declining-standards credential mill	202	29/47	28/46
RDM18	The fulfillment I experience as professor has declined	203	33/56	32/52
RDM19	I sometimes feel liberal arts degree is a gift	202	19/64	23/55
RDM20	I am optimistic about the future of higher education	204	27/47	23/44
Diversity, Meritocracy, and Mission				
DMM1	Due to biases, students of color have to perform stronger	200	56/22	23/53
DMM2	Racial/ethnic disparities due to systemic racism	200	69/11	34/41

Table 5 (continued)

DMM3	Students of color tend to be graded more leniently	199	05/75	32/40
DMM4	Reducing racial disparities undermining expectations in math	199	11/52	28/36
DMM5	Conventional English should not be significant factor in grading	195	18/66	06/80
DMM6	Minority underrepresentation due to discrimination	200	77/14	31/54
DMM7	Minority underrepresentation due to lack of qualified candidates	199	25/57	60/19
DMM8	I support equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives	201	95/03	68/17
DMM9	Virtually all students with academic deficits can excel with support	201	66/22	39/41
DMM10	Elimination of standardized testing is a positive development	200	67/15	45/38
DMM11	Standardized tests are cultural discriminatory, if not racist	201	79/07	41/38
DMM12	For students' mental health, we should move away from grades	201	22/48	10/74
DMM13	Students should be tested earlier for vocational or university path	199	23/55	37/43
DMM14	Programs should be eliminated if few to no job opportunities	201	01/92	12/77
DMM15	Civic mission of university as important as job skills	200	95/00	81/09
DMM16	Regardless of market, society should pay for affordable college	200	88/03	69/18

Note: Percentages rounded and collapsed Agree/Strongly Agree and Disagree/Strongly Disagree

Table 6: Distribution of Responses by Political Orientation

Survey Item	Item Descriptions	N	Radical (% agree/ disagree)	Liberal (% agree/ disagree)	Moderate (% agree/ disagree)
Academic Standards and Dilemmas					
ASD1	Grade inflation is a serious problem in higher education	201	31/31	49/22	50/13
ASD2	Academic standards have declined in recent years	201	35/31	40/32	65/15
ASD3	Student pushback regarding grades has increased	202	35/38	38/29	37/22
ASD4	Universities are succeeding in enhancing skills	201	50/23	75/15	47/24
ASD5	Corporatization of higher education is a serious problem	202	100/0	82/06	63/20
ASD6	Students are studying just as many hours today	201	35/38	36/36	24/52
ASD7	Too many students are not intellectually suited	201	23/62	31/46	52/24
ASD8	Some functionally illiterate students are graduating	201	46/46	36/50	46/43
ASD9	Grade inflation reflects improvement in student preparedness	199	00/54	09/59	15/59
ASD10	Encouraging four-year degree plays role in eroding standards	198	31/54	44/34	67/17
ASD11	Grade inflation due to need to keep programs financially viable	198	27/54	30/45	42/33
ASD12	Watering down courses does disservice to gifted students	195	38/44	39/40	71/16

Table 6 (continued)

Role Demands and Morale					
RDM1	Student evaluations should not be used for tenure and promotion	198	50/27	55/20	61/20
RDM2	Student evaluations are appropriate metric for tenure	197	39/46	27/60	31/42
RDM3	I self-censor on campus more and more in recent years	198	42/38	60/31	63/15
RDM4	Concerns over “cancel culture” and free speech are overblown	198	42/27	40/43	22/48
RDM5	Assessment practices enhance student learning	197	31/38	50/30	39/26
RDM6	Assessment movement is misguided	196	77/12	52/17	47/16
RDM7	I am playing a more emotionally supportive role with students	199	69/23	57/17	72/07
RDM8	Faculty not responsible for unmotivated students	198	38/50	38/32	65/24
RDM9	I routinely give grades higher than students merit	198	31/62	39/46	41/33
RDM10	I inflate grades because I don't want to lose enrollment	197	04/76	12/78	15/74
RDM11	I inflate grades to avoid student pushback	198	15/77	33/56	35/48
RDM12	I feel pressure by department or administration to inflate grades	198	15/77	19/73	30/50
RDM13	I have reduced the difficulty of my courses over the years	198	35/58	37/48	59/28
RDM14	I have felt frustrated by colleagues who routinely give A's	197	24/56	29/50	37/33

Table 6 (continued)

RDM15	I have never worried about grade distribution by race/ethnicity	197	35/46	41/49	67/17
RDM16	I am sensitive to students' different learning styles	198	85/15	71/18	46/25
RDM17	Demoralizing participating in declining-standards credential mill	195	24/48	28/48	40/34
RDM18	The fulfillment I experience as professor has declined	198	35/42	33/57	43/41
RDM19	I sometimes feel liberal arts degree is a grift	196	08/67	17/65	37/43
RDM20	I am optimistic about the future of higher education	197	35/50	22/45	24/38
Diversity, Meritocracy, and Mission					
DMM1	Due to biases, students of color have to perform stronger	194	62/27	39/36	11/61
DMM2	Racial/ethnic disparities due to systemic racism	194	66/15	54/24	20/43
DMM3	Students of color tend to be graded more leniently	192	08/68	17/60	35/33
DMM4	Reducing racial disparities undermining expectations in math	193	04/71	15/42	36/25
DMM5	Conventional English should not be significant factor in grading	188	22/70	07/75	07/77
DMM6	Minority underrepresentation due to discrimination	195	58/35	56/30	23/59
DMM7	Minority underrepresentation due to lack of qualified candidates	194	31/46	42/37	61/20
DMM8	I support equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives	196	88/04	88/05	53/24

Table 6 (continued)

DMM9	Virtually all students with deficits can excel with support	196	73/15	51/31	29/51
DMM10	Elimination of standardized testing is a positive development	195	72/16	61/22	29/53
DMM11	Standardized tests are cultural discriminatory, if not racist	196	77/15	62/18	33/47
DMM12	For students' mental health, we should move away from grades	196	38/54	11/62	11/71
DMM13	Students should be tested for vocational or university path	194	08/81	26/49	56/27
DMM14	Programs should be eliminated if few to no job opportunities	196	04/96	06/85	11/73
DMM15	Civic mission of university as important as job skills	195	100/00	92/03	69/29
DMM16	Regardless of market, society should pay for affordable college	195	100/00	85/07	51/22

Note: Percentages rounded and collapsed Agree/Strongly Agree and Disagree/Strongly Disagree

Table 7: OLS Regression Results: Academic Standards and Dilemmas

DV	Unstandardized Coefficients ^{1,2}						R ²	N
	<i>Program</i>		<i>Gender</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>				
	Eng.	Soc.	Female	Radical	Liberal	Moderate		
ASD1	-.162	.340	.018	-.578	-.224	.090	.060	218
ASD2	-.268	.183	-.236	-.402	-.356	.116	.096	218
ASD3	.082	.150	.104	-.233	-.059	.205	.015	219
ASD4	-.087	-.066	-.039	.305	.610*	.176	.047	218
ASD5	.467	-.104	.141	.582*	-.008	-.351	.157	219
ASD6	-.225	-.424*	.046	.255	.183	-.292	.035	218
ASD7	-.174	.079	-.294	-1.349**	-.881**	-.419	.122	218
ASD8	-.175	.009	.033	-.135	-.423	-.138	.023	218
ASD9	.158	-.291	-.073	-.121	.007	-.001	.046	216
ASD10	-.448*	.074	-.283	-1.168**	-.676*	-.302	.159	215
ASD11	-.158	-.113	-.172	-.513	-.407	-.008	.052	215
ASD12	-.348	.126	-.289	-.789*	-.675*	.058	.154	212

Note: 1) Intercept terms are not shown. 2) Significance tests are one-tailed (* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$)

Table 8: OLS Regression Results: Role Demands and Morale

DV	Unstandardized Coefficients ^{1,2}						R ²	N
	<i>Program</i>		<i>Gender</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>				
	Eng.	Soc.	Female	Radical	Liberal	Moderate		
RDM1	.045	-.121	.126	-.071	-.001	.208	.013	215
RDM2	-.324	-.191	-.344*	.221	-.025	.148	.060	214
RDM3	.265	.136	-.277	-1.267**	-.866**	-.500	.062	215
RDM4	.085	-.226	-.029	1.715**	1.517**	.953**	.126	215
RDM5	-.068	-.150	.159	-.249	.001	-.131	.014	214
RDM6	.087	-.165	.003	.526	-.061	-.045	.035	212
RDM7	.193	.127	.585**	.254	.062	.634*	.111	216
RDM8	.049	-.262	-.456**	-.640*	-.386	-.112	.085	215
RDM9	.165	.546*	-.097	-.362	-.054	.300	.043	215
RDM10	.070	.066	-.322*	-.102	.091	.104	.023	213
RDM11	.180	.579*	-.075	-.281	.373	.602*	.063	214
RDM12	-.573**	-.542*	.115	.045	-.028	.332	.065	215
RDM13	.253	.486*	-.028	-.588	-.346	.250	.040	215
RDM14	-.122	-.223	.150	-.482	-.499	-.204	.029	214
RDM15	-.257	-.194	.034	-1.042**	-.967**	-.272	.114	214
RDM16	.400*	.211	.687**	.443	.126	.103	.170	215
RDM17	-.155	.109	.164	-.052	-.172	.312	.031	211
RDM18	.138	.463	.003	.189	-.007	.550	.037	213
RDM19	-.426*	-.474*	.102	-1.218**	-1.184**	-.732*	.137	212
RDM20	-.392*	-.195	.006	.478	.438	.337	.030	213

Note: 1) Intercept terms are not shown. 2) Significance tests are one-tailed (* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$).

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Table 9: OLS Regression Results: Diversity, Meritocracy, and Mission

DV	Unstandardized Coefficients ^{1, 2}						R ²	N
	<i>Program</i>		<i>Gender</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>				
	Eng.	Soc.	Female	Radical	Liberal	Moderate		
DMM1	.294	.164	.750**	1.025**	.540*	.146	.215	210
DMM2	.412*	.132	.779**	1.337**	.916**	.607*	.243	210
DMM3	-.410	-.108	-.688**	-.861**	-.436	-.043	.173	208
DMM4	-.121	-.085	-.285*	-1.767**	-1.140**	-.672*	.189	209
DMM5	-.164	-.281	.453**	.107	-.047	-.003	.055	204
DMM6	.210	-.088	1.080**	1.265**	.927**	.484	.278	210
DMM7	-.161	.295	-.902**	-1.498**	-1.027**	-.721*	.253	209
DMM8	.059	-.257	.660**	1.604**	1.269**	.533*	.288	211
DMM9	.258	-.076	.348*	.996**	.334	.014	.115	211
DMM10	.346	.008	.403*	1.628**	1.226**	.436	.213	210
DMM11	.360	.024	.756**	1.693**	1.207**	.766*	.278	211
DMM12	.334*	.089	.673**	1.405**	.729**	.655*	.227	211
DMM13	.015	.161	-.147	-1.991**	-1.201**	-.430	.180	209
DMM14	-.321*	.123	-.280*	-1.329**	-.978**	-.730**	.190	211
DMM15	.752**	.453**	.147	.984**	.646**	.467*	.277	210
DMM16	.325*	-.144	.225	2.495**	1.893**	1.189**	.378	210

Note: 1) Intercept terms are not shown. 2) Significance tests are one-tailed (* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$).

Reviewing the tables, particularly the regression results, we see that gender and (especially) political identity are highly significant predictors of faculty's views across a range of questions. There is comparatively little variation by academic discipline, apart from a few notable items (RDM12, RDM19, DMM15). Math professors are significantly more likely than their English and sociology peers to acknowledge pressure to inflate grades, and to sometimes feel the liberal arts degree is a grift. However, math professors are significantly less likely than their colleagues to view the university's civic mission as important as its mission to purvey job skills, although a solid majority (64%) does so (Table 4, DMM15).

When we turn to gender, we see more pronounced significance. Indeed, women vary significantly from men in our sample on 18 survey items, including in 13 of the 16 diversity, meritocracy, and mission items. As we will address the diversity questions below, let us draw attention to a few of the more conspicuous role demand items in Tables 5 and 8. It is interesting that although a majority of faculty reject teaching evaluations as an appropriate metric for tenure decisions, female professors are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to do so (RDM2). Women's longstanding experience of gender bias in teaching evaluations (e.g., Flaherty 2019) may be relevant here.⁸ Notice as well that women are significantly more likely to affirm playing a more emotionally supportive role with students over the years, as well expressing sensitivity to students' different learning styles (RDM7, RDM16). Male faculty are much less likely than their female colleagues to hold themselves potentially responsible for students in class who are unmotivated to learn (RDM8).

Turning to political orientation, we see the most striking findings of the survey. Before diving in, we should note that our survey corroborates the widespread observation of liberal predominance in higher education (see Magness, 2020 for an overview). Indeed, as indicated in Table 1, 73% of our sample self-identifies as radical/liberal, 21% as moderate, and only 6% as conservative/ libertarian.⁹ What is remarkable about the political orientation results is that we find significance in 27 of the 48 items across the three survey themes. All but one item is significant in the diversity, meritocracy, and mission category. Moreover, the sizes of the coefficients are almost uniformly and appreciably larger than those for gender or academic program.

Notice, in this context, the typical *stairway* pattern of results. As we move from right to left, away from their outlying conservative colleagues, we see that the

⁸ We were admonished by a couple of respondents for not including gender bias in our formulation of item RDM1 (i.e., in addition to the framing of teaching evaluations as measures of "popularity" or "ease").

⁹ Due to their sparse representation, we combine conservatives and libertarians as the reference group in the political orientation models.

responses of moderates, liberals, and radicals tend to be linear and grow in significance. Consider, for example, RDM4, whether concerns over cancel culture or faculty's free speech are overblown. Here we see in Table 6 that 22% of moderate professors agree that such concerns are overblown, in contrast to 40% of liberals and 42% of radicals. Note the significance of these findings in the regression models in Table 9. Observe as well that there are nine items where the moderates do not differ significantly from the conservatives/libertarians, while the liberals and radicals do. Together, these findings plainly demonstrate the key role of political orientation in our findings. That is, political identity turns out to be by far the best predictor of where professors stand on these controversial survey items.

DISCUSSION: THE POLITICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION CONTROVERSIES

Visions and Values in Tension

In order to make sense of our provocative findings, we beg the readers' indulgence as we wax speculative on what we see as the role of ideology and emotion in higher education controversies. We will be completely transparent about our own standpoint on these matters, aware that our views may appear as wrongheaded and even offensive to some. This is unavoidable. If our pessimistic prognosis about university standards is accurate, we feel compelled to prompt this difficult conversation as part of a broader call for a necessary (if unlikely) policy response to current challenges.

Let us start by drawing attention to various illustrations of the stairway pattern of results that we allude to above. Here we'll highlight the descriptive results in Table 6, but we encourage readers to review the regression models as well, as they confirm the robust statistical significance of the findings.

- ASD4: 23% percent of radical professors, 31% percent of liberals, and 52% of moderates affirm that too many students are admitted to university today who are not intellectually suited;
- ASD10: 31% of radicals, 44% of liberals, and 67% of moderates agree that encouraging a four-year degree to all students, whatever their ability or preparedness, has played some role in the erosion of standards in higher education;
- ASD12: 38% of radicals, 39% of liberals, and 71% of moderates agree that the watering down of courses in recent years is doing a disservice to more academically gifted students;
- DMM1: 62% of radicals, 39% of liberals, and 11% of moderates affirm that due to differential treatment in college, marginalized students of color often have to perform stronger academically than more privileged students to earn the same grades;
- DMM2: 66% of radicals, 54% of liberals, and 20% of moderates agree that racial/ethnic disparities in academic performance are due in no small part to systemic racism;

- DMM9: 73% of radicals, 51% of liberals, and 29% of moderates agree that virtually all students admitted with serious academic deficits can excel in a challenging curricular environment with sufficient academic and university support;
- DMM11: 77% of radicals, 62% of liberals, and 33% of moderates affirm that standardized tests, such as the SAT, are culturally discriminatory, if not racist.

We select these items because they capture nicely the sharp contrast in visions. Why, for example, are moderate professors significantly more likely than their liberal/left peers to recognize students' intellectual deficits, or to view the massification of higher education as a reason for declining academic standards? Why are moderates less likely to affirm that systemic racism within universities plays a part in racial/ethnic disparities in academic performance? And why are liberals much less worried about the impact that the watering down of courses may have on academically gifted students?

To address these questions adequately would nudge us onto the contentious terrain of political psychology. We have unpacked relevant arguments in prior research on scholarly controversies (Horowitz et al., 2019; Horowitz et al., 2018a), hence we will not do so in depth here. We will note, however, that from the standpoint of political psychology, basic moral sensibilities that animate the liberal/left are strong feelings of care and fairness toward the vulnerable. The bleeding-heart stereotype holds, indeed, more than a kernel of truth. Yet contrary to the egalitarian protectiveness of the left, those further to the right tend to conform more readily to hierarchical relationships and resonate more with the sensibilities of order, certainty, and tough love. Political psychologists observe that conservatives tend to perceive a more dangerous world than liberals, one where laggards or free riders should receive their just deserts, lest they weaken the group. (For relevant literature in political psychology, see, e.g., Haidt 2012; Hetherington & Weiler, 2018; Jost et al., 2003; Skitka & Tetlock 1993).

We cannot delve further into the psychological texture of the left/right divide. But we must stress that if we are correct about the erosion of academic rigor, and its BWS underpinnings, we are not optimistic about a political response by the professoriate that could gain traction beyond liberal-minded allies. The difficulty, as we have argued elsewhere (Horowitz et al., 2018a), is that liberal-left intellectuals not only feel compassion for vulnerable groups, but often "sacralize" them in a way that hinders objective appraisals of their circumstances. Indeed, the left's instincts to protect the vulnerable manifest in narratives of marginalization, systemic racism, microaggressions, and more that insulate lower-performing students from accountability for their outcomes. Note that the boundaries of these narratives are both intellectual and moral. Empirical claims that attribute responsibility to otherwise *underserved* students, or even acknowledge differences in their ability or effort, are often policed out of campus discussion. The problem is exacerbated by the

overwhelming predominance of liberals among the faculty ranks, which reinforces an echo chamber of shared assumptions, rarely interrogated or openly contested.¹⁰

Consider the following message we received from a plainly indignant respondent:

In the spirit of collegiality and the expectation of unbiased sociological research, I began to take your survey. I stopped about halfway through because I found the questions to be biased and leading. I am shocked they were approved by your IRB. Terms like "not intellectually suited," "functionally illiterate," and "not prepared for college" are all euphemisms for students hailing from communities of colors and lower socioeconomic classes. The phrasing of your questions betrays your own views on the "controversies" facing higher ed. I would expect a much higher level of objectivity from a tenured professor in sociology at Seton Hall University.

This respondent was hardly alone in their unfriendly reaction to the questionnaire. Though we received many more positive comments, we found that questions bearing on students' intellectual abilities, or a potential link between student performance and declining academic standards, were outright incendiary to some. To wit, consider these responses to ASD7 ("Too many students are admitted to university today who are not intellectually suited") and ASD10 ("Encouragement of a four-year degree to all students, whatever their ability or preparedness, has played some role in the erosion of standards in higher education"):

- What kind of university? In the context of my university, I find the question pretty offensive to be honest.
- This right-wing talking point might just as well be rephrased to say, "Too many poor kids and students of color are admitted to university today who are threatening the hierarchy we want to preserve."
- If underprepared rich kids can make up 41% of the white student body at Harvard and still manage to graduate, I'm going to need some actual proof that a hard-working Black kid from a blue-collar neighborhood is somehow eroding standards in higher education.
- Outrageously high "standards" reflect an elitist view of higher ed that has kept minoritized students (racial, ethnic, first-gen, low SES) from climbing the social ladder.
- This way of thinking is a cancer on our society's moral character.

¹⁰ We were pleased to receive 1369 comments across the substantive survey items. Trivial grammar edits are occasionally made for readability. It is important to add that while we cite respondents in the ensuing discussion, comments were optional throughout the survey. We cannot, therefore, make claims to generalizability, though the mixed nature of the comments mirrors the variation in our results.

Such deeply moralizing language and charges of elitism were not uncommon among a substantial fraction of respondents. We must emphasize that a minority of respondents articulated such views. And again, as comments were optional, we are hesitant to speculate at how prevalent these sensibilities may be among the professoriate nationwide. We can say, however, that a solid subset expressed such beliefs. Given the possibility of self-selection bias among respondents (and the aforementioned 74 who exited the survey without responding to a single question), we fear such views may be even more widespread than our survey results suggest.

Why do we *fear* the prevalence of such views? Aren't the professors above simply expressing compassion toward disadvantaged students who have just as much a right to attend college as rich, White kids? Moreover, isn't the claim that there are too many students in college today who are not "intellectually suited" merely a justification for a class and race hierarchy that we (perhaps furtively) "want to preserve," as the respondent above asserts?

Putting aside that we are left/liberals ourselves (the lead author identifies as Marxist humanist and the latter as communitarian and social democratic, respectively), we oppose these views on both substantive and, in fact, political grounds. We will address the knotty political problem below, but our substantive objection could not be plainer: *we oppose such views because they are not true*. Identifying people as intellectually suited or not for college is not an intrinsically elitist, classist, or (worse) racist idea. Abilities vary in scholastics as they do in music, art, and athletics. As universities admit a higher percentage of college-age students each decade (NCES, 2017), simply assuming a normal distribution of intellectual ability ensures that there will be increased representation of students on both tails of the bell curve. Nor is it elitist to surmise that increased numbers of lower-performing students in the classroom might erode expectations for all students, prompting a decline in course rigor. Are the third of faculty in our sample who openly admit to reducing rigor over the years (Table 3, RDM13) classist or racist for doing so?

Regrettably, many professors' deeply egalitarian sentiments derail an honest conversation on these matters in a (perhaps unconscious) impulse to protect vulnerable students. The result is all manner of unrealistic claims. We know, of course, that progressives have long chafed at the implications (if not the existence) of natural differences in intellectual ability. Resistance to the notion has taken many forms, such as the belief that intelligence is too multifaceted for any general factor (*g*) to exist; that standardized tests simply measure people's ability to take the tests; that standardized tests do not predict college success; or that students' academic performance is determined strictly by their socioeconomic background. We cannot lay out a challenge to these claims here, apart from noting decades of research contradicting them. (For overviews on intelligence research, see, e.g., Deary, 2020; Haier, 2017; Mackintosh, 2011; Ritchie, 2015; Warne, 2020).

Consider these responses to ASD12 ("The watering down of courses in recent years is doing a disservice to more academically gifted students"):

- The premise of this question is repulsively elitist.
- I do not know what "watering down of courses" means.

- So-called "academically gifted" students have plenty of "advanced" opportunities for special learning in higher education today.
- I recognize the statement as code for a racist and possibly sexist meritocratic stance. There are still plenty of honors programs, advanced courses, and other academic opportunities for students who are more academically accomplished.
- I don't accept the wording of this question, which displays bias. I'm stopping here.

Notice how the respondents interpret the question through a narrowly normative lens. They appear trigger-ready to morally condemn the item, while dismissing the empirical possibility that more academically gifted students *could actually be impacted* by the erosion of course rigor. Throughout the comments, we repeatedly hear the view stated above that the stronger students have honors programs, advanced courses, and the like to excel. Maybe. Another possibility is that they set their sights lower, in comparative satisfaction vis-à-vis their classmates. It is hard to imagine, in any event, that even the brightest students would actively seek more demanding content than a course actually requires. These concerns were hardly voiced. Although most comments reveal doubt that course rigor has declined, several echo the respondent above by indicating that they do not know what the "watering down" of courses means. This strikes us as perhaps willfully obtuse. How is the meaning of the phrase in doubt? We received comparable revelations of "ignorance" on other items (e.g.): "I may ask what we consider, "intellectually suited" (ASD7); "I am not sure what is meant by 'standards'" (ASD10); "I don't know what constitute 'serious academic deficits'" (DMM9). It appears that some respondents, emotively committed to the well-being of the most disadvantaged students, are simply loath to acknowledge intellectual differences or any possible costs to reducing course rigor.

Resistance to the very notion of intellectual ability dovetails with conservative criticism of "educational romanticism" (Murray 2008, p. 6). This is the idea that students of below average intellectual ability can be lifted up to average or even superior competency by effective teachers and adequate university support. We aimed to tap this sentiment in DMM9 ("Virtually all students admitted with serious academic deficits can excel in a challenging curricular environment with sufficient academic and university support"). A solid plurality (47%) of respondents agrees with the view vs. over a third (35%) who disagrees. Notice again the contrast by political orientation, with 29% of moderates, 51% of liberals, and 73% of radicals agreeing. We will not dwell on the statement beyond expressing considerable surprise that so many faculty affirm it. Our (perhaps old school?) view is that our pedagogy does not make students any smarter. To be sure, we teach students techniques, expose them to rich and diverse information, and the like. Yet in the end, at best, we inspire them to reach their highest potential. We do not determine that potential.

We suspect the same wishful compassion prompts many professors to perceive admissions tests as biased. In a rare majority consensus, 51% of faculty believes the elimination of such tests is a positive development, while a plurality (44%) views them as discriminatory, if not racist (DMM10, DMM11). Again, we can only stress here the relevant psychometric consensus that the latter claim is untrue. Such tests

have been honed for decades to eliminate bias. Moreover, the persistently higher average scores of Asians over Whites is hard to square with the notion that such tests are tailored to White European cultural identity and language or are reflections of “White supremacy.” Warne (2020) makes the important point that the fact that admissions tests are unbiased does not mean they are necessarily “fair.” Given entrenched racial/ethnic disparities in test performance, strong arguments can and have been made that the value of diversity outweighs the value of academic merit alone. Our point is that these are two legitimate values in tension in higher education debate. Our hope is that reflection on the moral sensibilities that animate us as liberal faculty will help foster receptiveness to those with whom we disagree. Righteous dismissals or inaccurate claims about intellectual ability or standardized tests undermine the wider social trust and consensus we need to confront current crises.

We now turn to a few of the most delicate survey items on diversity. Again, we see solid subsets or even pluralities of faculty taking positions that strike us as highly implausible. Recall that 46% of faculty agrees that “racial/ethnic disparities in students’ academic performance are due in no small part to systemic racism within universities” (Table 6, DMM2); and 34% agrees that “due to differential treatment in college, such as implicit or explicit biases, marginalized students of color often have to perform stronger academically than more privileged students to earn the same grades” (Table 6, DMM1). Numerous respondents treated these statements as basically settled science. “This is a known fact, not an opinion;” “This has been proven through various studies;” etc. Tellingly, neither of these questions prompted accusations of “bias” in our formulations, despite numerous charges of such on other items. Observe responses when we reverse the question framing in DMM3 (“I wouldn’t be surprised if marginalized students of color tend to be graded more leniently than more privileged students in university today”):

- This is bordering on overt racism.
- **MYTH AND RIGHT-WING BIAS** [boldface theirs]
- I work at a highly diverse public university proud of serving minority communities, so my [disagreement] is colored by that.

Such responses suggest that the frequent accusations of survey bias we received are not ultimately about question wording, but, rather, respondents’ moral opposition to the positions asserted. It is precisely because of the intense moralization of these matters that we are skeptical that faculty might come to a coherent and unified voice against the corporatization of the university (more on this below). To state our view on this issue baldly, we find it inconceivable that minority students today have to work harder than White students for the same grades, due to the conscious or implicit biases of professors. Universities are, after all, among the most liberal institutions in the United States. Given the BWS convergence, and particularly the racially sensitive cultural context, we are inclined to agree with those respondents who suspect (if anything) that any biases would work the other way.

We share company, hence, with the 50 or so professors in our sample who would not be surprised if marginalized students of color were graded more leniently at their universities (DMM3). Indeed, we would ask readers to ponder the following peculiarity: The suggestion that overwhelmingly liberal faculty often grade students of color more strictly due to prejudice hardly raises an eyebrow. Yet the idea that such faculty might grade them more leniently due to sensitivity is met with outrage or charges of racism.

To preempt any confusion on this combustible issue, we attribute racial disparities in student performance to upstream factors that profoundly impact students long before they enter the university gates. Established sociological variables strike us as key: historically inherited poverty, joblessness, housing and neighborhood insecurity, cumulative stressors, overcrowded schools, and broken families. Wider societal racism matters as well, but again, we discount its relevance in university settings. In this light, we strongly disagree with the spirit, but appreciate the honesty, of the respondent above who reveals that their disagreement with DMM3 is influenced by their “diverse” university’s pride in “serving minority communities.” Whether or not some group of students is being graded by faculty on a different standard than other students is an *empirical* question. We must strive not to hold our empirical assessments hostage to even our most virtuous emotions. But again, we appreciate the respondent’s sincerity, as they at least recognize how their sympathy for vulnerable students shapes their judgment on the matter.

If we step back and reflect, we see equivocation in left discourse on these issues. On the one hand, we hear, accurately in our view, how the structural conditions cited above (poverty, joblessness, crime, institutional racism, etc.) conspire to profound disadvantage (if not sustained trauma) for marginalized communities. Yet in the next breath we hear, “There are just as many qualified candidates by race and class across professional positions in the economy.” In debate over disparate outcomes, somehow the structural traumas disappear or have no impact on people’s capacity to cultivate their competitive talents in the market.

In our view, the same sociological variables we cite above account for the underrepresentation of minority faculty in universities. Yet here we see discernable ambivalence among respondents on items DMM6 (“The underrepresentation of minority faculty in universities today is largely due to (often subtle) processes of discrimination in the hiring and tenure processes”), and DMM7 (“The underrepresentation of minority faculty in universities today is largely due to a lack of enough qualified applicants, not discrimination in the hiring or tenure processes”). Notice in Table 3 that pluralities of respondents agree with both items (46% and 49%, respectively), despite the fact that the statements make contradictory claims. We make this point not to *call out* our faculty colleagues for inconsistency. We aim, rather, to highlight what are likely to be the same emotive dynamics at play that we saw in the questions discussed above. The sensitive ideological climate today promotes what we see as the dubious view that universities’ current practices are “systemically racist” (Museus et al., 2015, p. 49) or that the “pipeline” argument – that there are often not enough qualified candidates of color – is simply a “racist trope” (McDonald, 2021, p. 7). We will not elaborate further on this. Suffice to say that in our many years in higher education, we have served on myriad search

committees. None of us can recall a single committee that didn't value diversity a great deal or would not have relished hiring someone from a disadvantaged background. We should note that we were encouraged by respondents' comments, as the vast majority (around 90%) concurred with the pipeline view (DMM7). We wonder in this light if some who marked agreement with DMM6 (that minority faculty underrepresentation is largely due to discrimination) may have done so unreflexively, in alignment with taken-for-granted progressive presumptions.

CONCLUSION

Toward a Civic Transformation of the Corporate University

We will close by highlighting the takeaways of our report in connection with the daunting political challenges ahead. First, we hope readers interpret criticism of our liberal/left colleagues in the spirit in which it is intended. Indeed, we share a moral vision kindred to the most progressive of our respondents:

- There should be no test of "intellectual suitability" for admission to college.
- A university education is not a prize to be limited to a handful of lucky winners but a resource which should be freely available to all.

We wholly concur that this is how our university system *should* be. We should have publicly funded higher education, as we had in the post-war decades, where places like Berkeley or CUNY were essentially free. We can only imagine the impact a return to public financing would have on the climate of academic rigor. It would be liberating to know that rigorously grading or even failing students wouldn't exacerbate their already unsustainable debt or threaten our academic programs by the perverse metric of our *failing* to graduate them. *But political-economic circumstances have changed dramatically.* The shift from public support to the student-debt-financed regime, coupled with universities' drive to attract and retain students at all costs, suggests the need for serious self-interrogation about the product students are buying and the economic landscape they are inheriting. If our anxiety about gradually eroding standards turns out to be true (akin to the proverbial frog in boiling water), then the product sold could lose even its signaling function of student competence and grit.

Given current pressures, we sympathize with those who inflate grades or compassionately promote otherwise failing students. However, we cannot lose sight of students' mounting debt burden. Are we genuinely serving students by passing them through if they lack basic literacy or analytic skills? Will the work world be as *compassionate*? Although we cannot know from our survey how widespread the phenomenon actually is, it is concerning that 40% of respondents believe their university is graduating some "functionally illiterate" students (ASD8). Most of the comments affirm this (e.g., "I have had many;" "I am SURE this is the case;" etc.). Again, we understand the context. As a respondent notes, echoing our survey's themes, "Many professors are passing students merely to survive. I often see graduate

students in humanities courses who have been admitted with extremely poor writing and reading skills. They are also unable to take criticism.”¹¹

We perceive, hence, deeply structural problems in our contemporary economy and society. To advocate for state reinvestment and a national commitment to higher education as a *civic good* appears quixotic today. But it is taken for granted in other advanced economies and has appeared on the platforms of major presidential candidates in the United States. We are heartened that this is the one area in our survey that prompts overwhelming consensus. Eighty-five percent of respondents agrees that the university’s civic mission is at least as important as purveying job skills (DMM15); and 75% affirms that regardless of what the market values, we as society should pay for four-year college for all (DMM16). Solid majorities of even politically moderate professors concur.

We suggest, in closing, that this is the foundation upon which faculty must be united to address the crises of higher education. We face severe ecological and socioeconomic problems today, not least the threats of climate change and a (senescent?) capitalist economy increasingly automating away well-paid employment even outside the already hyper-robotized manufacturing sector. We staunchly reject, in this light, conservative calls for vocationalizing college or dismantling the liberal arts or programs deemed “unmarketable.”¹² Contemporary challenges make it imperative to have as civically informed and cultivated a citizenry as possible. Part of that civic education must be a commitment to building trust across ideological lines. Even putting aside the turmoil of the pandemic, it is alarming to face such perilous challenges when indicators of trust in each other and in our social institutions are at record lows (Brenan, 2021; Rainie, 2019).

Any hope to foster the collective will for a transformation of the corporate university requires coalition building across the political divide. The broader public must buy in, quite literally, to not just the market value but the *civic* value of a college degree. We cannot make that case by eroding standards or diminishing the traditional values of hard work and merit. We suspect that conservatives exaggerate the harms of cancel culture or wokeism in society. Yet we do ourselves little favor as liberals if we mischaracterize or moralize elementary facts about intellectual ability, standardized tests, or the alleged intractability of “White supremacy” in our universities or other institutions.

We hope, in sum, that our findings prompt awareness and action within the academy and without regarding the forces threatening the legitimacy of the college degree. In addition to self-interrogation of our predominantly liberal biases, we encourage faculty to support organizations, such as Heterodox Academy, that promote viewpoint diversity in higher education. Of course, more conservative voices

¹¹ Unsurprisingly, we encountered occasional offense as well: “This item is almost an insult to students and reflects deeply problematic prevailing misconceptions about students and about the nature and purposes of higher education.”

¹² Lest we be misinterpreted, we are of course not demeaning the value and dignity of vocational training and related employment roles.

will have their own biases and partial standpoints as well. Yet their virtual absence in higher education today suggests we are far from even approaching ideological parity.

We need college graduates prepared to confront formidable political and intellectual challenges ahead. Universities' commitment to the values of civic trust and academic excellence are indispensable in that regard. Whatever the errors in this report, we hope it inspires hard and honest conversations essential to that task.

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