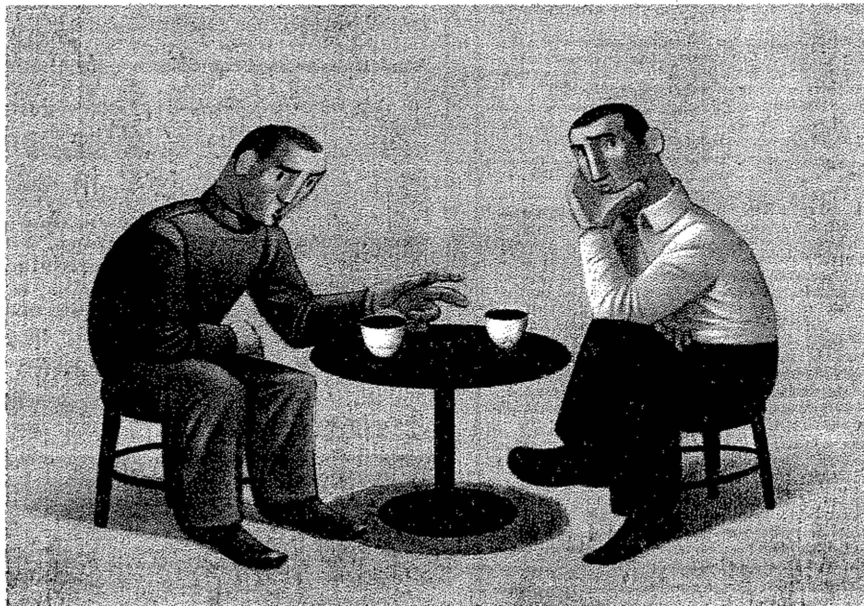
By JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN

A Little Shame Goes a Long Way



CHRISTOPHE VORLET FOR THE CHRONICLE

SHAME ON US!

The cat is finally out of the bag about what our students are learning, and it isn't pretty. It's more like a dog, or maybe a pig. A warthog, even.

I'm talking about the much-discussed *Academically Adrift* by my New York University colleague Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia, which demonstrates that nearly half of college undergraduates don't significantly improve their reasoning or writing skills over the first two years of college. After four years, subsequent analysis showed, more than one-third of all students showed no significant gains in those skills.

And yes, we should all be ashamed about that. But shame can be good, if it gets us to do the right thing. And in this case, I think it can.

The authors based their conclusions on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, an essay-only test designed to measure higher-level thinking and expression. One sample question presents a set of documents about an airplane that recently crashed and asks students to advise an imaginary executive about whether his company should purchase that type of plane. Another provides data about a city mayor's crime-reduction program, instructing students to counsel the mayor on how to respond to criticisms of the program.

Arum and Roksa tracked more than 2,300 students at 24 different institutions, including selective liberal-arts colleges and big land-grant universities, as well as historically black and Hispanic institutions. Forty-five percent of students showed no significant gain on the Collegiate Learning Assessment between freshman and sophomore year. And 36 percent didn't improve in a statistically significant way between their freshman and senior years.

The reason isn't hard to find: Most students don't read and write very much. And the reason for *that* isn't a mystery, either: We don't ask them to.

More than half of the students in Arum and Roksa's sample had not taken a single class in the semester before they were surveyed that required a total of 20 pages of writing. That's not a misprint; it's a scandal. And lo and behold, students whose professors did require them to write more than 20 pages a term—and to read more than 40 pages per week—performed significantly better on the CLA.

So we really do know what works and what doesn't. College students now spend about 12 hours a week studying, on average, and more than one-third report studying less than five hours per week. If we want them to learn more, we'll have to ask more of them—and of ourselves.

Consider, too, that 17 percent of students in the study's sample didn't meet with a faculty member outside of class during the first year of college, and that 9 percent had *never* talked to a professor outside of class. Many students simply ignore us, and we return the favor. It's mutual.

So how can we change any of that? Going back to the 2006 Spellings Commission report on higher education, some critics have proposed accountability measures that would reward or penalize faculty members for student performance. But we still don't know how to measure the effects of a single class or professor on individual achievement, and we all know that resourceful academics could game any accountability system we devised.

So I've got a simpler idea. And it brings us back to shame, one of the truly great motivators in the human arsenal.

Suppose that every college and university reviewed syllabi and student evaluations to identify professors who scored consistently low on two measures: the amount of work assigned and the amount of time spent with students. Then a peer—ideally, a colleague in the same department or division—would take each of those professors out for coffee, inform them about the below-average scores, and offer to help.

Before you start scoffing, you should know that the "cup-of-coffee method" has already been tried with physicians, and it works.

Since the late 1990s, doctors at Vanderbilt University have held these casual chats with more than 1,600 doctors who have elicited complaints from patients or staff regarding their rude or unprofessional behavior. About 60 percent of them generate fewer complaints after, yes, a single cup of coffee.

The meetings are informal, Gerald Hickson, who directs the Vanderbilt Center for Patient and Professional Advocacy, told an interviewer in 2009, but their message is unmistakable. "Bob, for whatever reason, you seem to be associated with more complaints than the vast majority of your colleagues," said Hickson, describing the typical encounter with a "disruptive" doctor. "I'm not here to ascertain why. My goal is not to tell you what to do, but to suggest that you review the material I am sharing with you and reflect on what families are saying about your practice."

And for more than half of the doctors, that simple line does the trick. Many are unaware of how they're being perceived; others know but hav[e] been told about it by a peer. [...] they change.

Of the remaining 40 perc[ent] meanwhile, about half—th[at] 20 percent of the total—eve[ntu]ally leave their medical pra[ctice] another one. The other 20 p[ercent] of disruptive doctors receiv[e] "authority intervention" fro[m] or other leader, who develo[ps] improvement and evaluatio[n] each of them.

Could this process beco[me] disruptive in its own right? That's why the Vanderbilt t[eam] trains so-called "peer mess[engers]" who are taught how to talk [to] offending doctors. It's not a[...] the woodshed; it's more lik[e a] wake-up call, with a prodd[...] out of bed.

We could use the same c[up-of-cof]fee technique with our own professors, who are less dis[ruptive] than deadbeat: They don't [...] enough. "Joe, the average c[ourse] in our college requires 50 p[ages of] reading per week and three papers," the discussion might begin. "In the amoun[t] assigned, your course is in the bottom 10 percent." [...] also tell Joe that 60 percent of the students report m[eeting] with their professor out of class, but only 20 percen[t of his] students did.

Most of all, we might share the overwhelming ev[idence] gathered by Arum and Roksa, and by many others[...] students aren't learning very much, but that they'll [...] more if we ask more of them. University professors [are in the] knowledge business: They're socialized to care abo[ut] research. They'll care about this, too.

They are also acutely status-anxious, of course. [...] have to be Pierre Bourdieu to know that *Homo aca[demicus]* wants peer approval. The news that he or she ranks [...] a set of peers—on any index—will put the fear of [...] some of them.

And the others? They won't care. Nor will they h[...] masse to other pastures, like many disruptive docto[rs...] continue to clog up classroom space—and tenure li[nes...] they retire. But it can't hurt to give them a little nud[ge].

Of course, we'll have to make allowances for co[...] math and the natural sciences, where assignments [...] take the form of problem sets and laboratory report[s...] formal essays. And we'll also have to think about t[...] ing population of special-needs students, who migh[t...] new services and accommodations to meet higher [...] demands.

But we can do that, too, and still bring peer pres[sure...] each other. We don't need another set of memorand[a...] high, or—God forbid—another faculty committee. [...] need is a cup of coffee and the good faith that goes [...]

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