

# The Five-Year Party

"Any parent who wants their college-bound teen to actually learn something for their heaps of tuition money should read this book."

—*Jean M. Twenge, author of Generation Me and co-author of The Narcissism Epidemic*

HOW COLLEGES HAVE GIVEN UP ON  
EDUCATING YOUR CHILD  
AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT



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## Praise for *The Five-Year Party*

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“High costs and debt, insufficient instruction, dangerous campuses, and poor job prospects: for many students, a five-year college party often turns into a lifelong nightmare. *The Five-Year Party* is packed with illuminating stories and details about this crisis situation, and helps readers to avoid the dangers and get the most for their money.”

—Marc Scheer, Author, *No Sucker Left Behind: Avoiding the Great College Rip-Off*

“In one dismaying and maddening episode and circumstance after another, Craig Brandon’s survey of college campuses sounds a vital warning for parents: ‘The institutions and administrators you trust to foster and guide your children’s formation are more interested in their pocketbooks than the intellects. Buyer beware!’”

—Mark Bauerlein, Author of *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* and Professor of English, Emory University

“After reading only a few pages of *The Five-Year Party*, I immediately started telling people about its important message. This crucial book exposes the consumer mentality now all too prevalent on college campuses, detailing how higher education has given students what they *want* at the expense of giving them what they *need* to compete in the global marketplace. Even better, the book tells parents and educators how this nefarious trend can be circumvented. Any parent who wants their college-bound teen to actually learn something for their heaps of tuition money should read this book.”

—Jean M. Twenge, Author of *Generation Me* and Co-Author of *The Narcissism Epidemic* and Professor of Psychology, San Diego State University

“With broad, unforgiving strokes, Craig Brandon paints a dark picture of residential college life that will give every parent pause before sending a child off to any of his ‘Party Schools.’”

—Barrett Seaman, Author of *Binge: Campus Life in an Age of Disconnection and Excess*

# The Five-Year Party

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HOW COLLEGES HAVE GIVEN UP ON  
EDUCATING YOUR CHILD  
AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

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**Craig Brandon**



BENBELLA BOOKS, INC.

*Dallas, TX*

*To my granddaughter, Charlotte Claire Brandon Anthony: May you never have to endure the terror  
of a party school.*

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# Introduction

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My first inkling that something had gone seriously hay-wire in higher education came just after the turn of the millennium, when I was asked to take over the job of advisor to the campus radio station. I had spent the previous five years as a full-time journalism instructor and advisor to the student newspaper at Keene State College in New Hampshire, but I knew very little about radio. Nevertheless, it seemed like an interesting challenge and many of my colleagues from the College Media Advisors, who advised both newspapers and radio stations, said they would help me out. After all, how difficult could it be?

I met with the students who ran the radio station at their weekly meeting and we introduced ourselves. They seemed to be a good group of students interested in music and I explained that I would be learning on the job from them. We seemed to get along fine. But when I tuned in the radio station on my car radio while driving home from work, I was so shocked by what I heard that I had to pull over to listen. It wasn't just the crude lyrics of the songs I found offensive but the comments from the disc jockeys, who attacked fellow students and teachers by name, discussed the physical attributes of female students' anatomies, and described their latest sexual and alcoholic adventures in detail. It was like three dozen young Howard Sterns competing to be the most offensive.

One of the first things I did was to contact some of my CMA colleagues and explain what was going on. They offered advice and e-mailed me copies of their rulebooks for student radio stations and condensed versions of Federal Communications Commission regulations regarding low wattage college stations. These were very helpful; at the next meeting with the students I handed out copies.

It became clear to me immediately that they had only a dim understanding of what was required of them in terms of eliminating profanity and slander and complying with the seemingly endless and complicated FCC regulations. We talked about public access files, prescreening of music before it was put on the playlist, and the legal limits on what they could say on the air.

At first, they seemed willing to go along with the new rules; we set up committees to deal with eliminating obscenity and to deal with all of the draconian FCC regulations about things like how long they had to stay on the air and all the various documents that had to be maintained, such as public access files. Within a few weeks, however, there was widespread rebellion. All of this was just too much work, they said. All they really wanted to do was play music on the radio. "This sounds like censorship," they said. "Why can't we do what we want?"

There really wasn't a choice, I explained. Failure to follow the rules could mean we'd have to deal with slander lawsuits from listeners and fines from the FCC. We could even lose our license. It all fell on deaf ears. It was much more fun to do it the way they had always done it, they said. The meeting ended with catcalls and raspberries. On the way home that night, I listened again and the station was

back to the same offensive songs about the pleasures of raping women and disk jockeys describing detail their personal exploits during their “fucked up” weekends. It seemed to me that they were deliberately broadcasting the most offensive songs and saying things that they now knew were slanderous and unprofessional.

Many of the station’s listeners were local high school students and I could imagine their parents listening in. When I discussed this with the students, they told me I should stop listening to the station because it seemed to them that I was spying on them. I knew then that I was in way over my head and I met with the student affairs administrators to ask for some help. They set up a meeting with the students and me to discuss the dispute and come up with a resolution.

I began the meeting by carefully explaining the situation and showed the group the FCC rules and the handbooks that were used by other colleges faced with the same issues. When it was their turn, the students complained that it was their radio station and that I was interfering with their right to do what they wanted.

Then I sat back and waited for the students to be read the riot act by the administrator in charge of student organizations. To my absolute astonishment, he said that the students were correct. It was the radio station, he said, financed by student fee money, and the college’s policy was that faculty and administrators were not to interfere with their decisions. The students cheered as my jaw dropped in astonishment. I could not even speak for a moment.

What followed was a series of meetings at which the college’s communication professors lined up on my side and the student affairs administrators lined up on the students’ side. As an institution of higher learning, my colleagues said, our first responsibility was to teach students how to act responsibly and ethically. At the very least, students should be required to follow federal regulations. Howard Stern, we claimed, had no place within the academic community. The student affairs administrators were not moved and continued to maintain that students should be allowed to do what they wanted. These meetings reached all the way up to the vice presidential level, with the vice president of academic affairs agreeing with me and the vice president of student affairs backing the students. Because the two vice presidents had equal power, we were at an impasse and I resigned as the station’s advisor rather than allow students to break federal regulations.

What I didn’t know then was that the seemingly bizarre position of the student affairs administrators—that college students should be allowed to do whatever they wanted on campus—was the first of many encounters I’d have with what has come to be known as the “student empowerment movement.”

During the late 1990s, college administrators throughout the \$600-billion-per-year higher education industry were beginning to reject the old model where colleges’ primary mission was to educate students and teach them how to act ethically and responsibly. The new, modern ethos was to treat higher education as a business, where the students were the customers and the primary role

administrators was to keep them as happy as possible and to bend over backwards to ensure the unhappy students didn't transfer to a more student-friendly college that would try harder to satisfy their needs. Educating students, which used to be the primary role of colleges, became secondary. The new campus catchword: *retention*. Colleges that took a hard line against student misbehavior risked losing students to less rigorous colleges that had already adopted the "anything goes" philosophy. Colleges that refused to adopt this student-friendly attitude would lose students and soon go out of business, the theory went. Telling students things they didn't want to hear, setting high academic standards, and grading students fairly had all become secondary to the prime directive: retention.

During the next few years, I watched as this "retention at all costs" policy crept into the academic side of the college. The vice president of academic affairs who had defended me on the radio station issue was forced to resign and was replaced with a younger and much more hip administrator who listened carefully to what students wanted and gave it to them, even if it was not in the best interests of education.

In a public memo, he told students that plagiarizing information from the internet for their term papers could be defended as a trendy "mash up." At a college that used to value multi-culturalism, he dropped the foreign language requirement because students told him they didn't like it. He reduced the number of classes students were required to take to receive a diploma from forty to thirty. Classes that used to earn three credits were magically transformed into four credits each and extended by a few minutes, even though the average student attention span was widely acknowledged to be only about twenty minutes. Students loved the guy.

But it didn't end there. The period of time that students had to drop a class was extended by several weeks, until the deadline was right before final exams. This pretty much eliminated the very unpopular practice of failing students who didn't show up or failed tests. Students could now simply withdraw from classes right before the final exams. And because students said it made them uncomfortable to ask their professor to sign the withdrawal form, my signature was no longer required. Students simply disappeared from my class and I didn't even know about it until I got my final grading sheet. And if, despite all these changes, students still weren't able to drop the class successfully, the student just got an "administrative withdrawal form" from an administrator.

This seemed like a curious practice, allowing students to drop a class rather than fail it, until a wise and more knowledgeable professor explained it for me. Students who fail a class might get discouraged and leave, he said, but allowing a student to drop a class simply erased it from his record. Everything was set back to zero, except for one thing. The student still had to pay the tuition money for the class.

At about this time, I first heard the expression *super senior* for students who were in their fifth or sixth years at a four-year college. Many of these students had dropped dozens of classes over the years; therefore, they did not have enough credits to graduate at the end of their senior years. Other students were so poor at choosing classes that they had not signed up for courses that were required

for graduation. This seemed like a crisis to me, but other professors explained it for me. Students who ~~take six years to graduate from a four-year college, which is how long it takes at the average college~~ these days, represent a financial benefit for the college, which receives 50 percent more tuition money for each student. “They want students to drop classes because it means they take in more money,” I said.

The idea for this book dates back to that conversation and listening in faculty meetings as the new vice president of academic affairs praised the business model of higher education, which catered to individual student customers, and criticized the old model, where education was the prime mission of higher education. That old-fashioned way of running a college, he said, was the “Mom and Pop store model” hopelessly outdated.

As I said, the students loved him, but many of my faculty colleagues began to whisper that the world as they had known it seemed to be coming to an end. Each year, freshmen arrived in our classrooms less prepared and more poorly educated than the year before. They were also much less engaged in the education process and less willing to work. Unlike the students of just a few years before, they seemed to have little interest in learning anything but were forthright in their demands that they be given high grades simply for showing up. It became clear to faculty that failing students was no longer an acceptable option. Increasingly, students refused to do homework, refused to read the textbook, and refused to participate in class, yet reacted angrily when they received a grade lower than an A.

In the late 1990s, it was still considered ethical to flunk students who failed tests, refused to do the work, and were not interested in learning. During the years from 2001 to 2005, however, the disengaged students gradually became a majority, increasing their power in the classroom and at the college. Professors who continued to post honest grades and refused to cave in to student demands were terrorized in their written, year-end evaluations by students. Administrators whose primary mission has shifted from education to retention were listening to those complaints and taking them seriously, fearful that unhappy students would move their digs and their tuition money to a more lenient college. It became clear to professors that their jobs depended on making students happy. This meant dumbed-down classes, easy assignments, little or no work, and high grades.

This was, of course, a major topic of discussion among the faculty, and I spent many hours over lunch and in the gym griping with them about it. Everyone understood what the problem was and what it was happening, but it was also understood that speaking about it at public meetings would be a career killer. Many of my colleagues’ views ran completely counter to the “retention at any cost” ethic that the administration was spouting. Even professors with tenure knew that they would be punished for speaking out, so they remained silent. Professors who told me in private that “My students are so dumb I don’t know how they find their way to classes” or “Of course I can’t give her the grade she really deserves,” simply refused to deal with the problem in public. The prevailing attitude was that the academic emperor’s nakedness was not to be acknowledged publicly.

My colleagues from the national College Media Advisors, most of whom, like me, were former

journalists, discussed by e-mail the phenomenon of colleges that no longer cared if students learned anything. Over drinks and dinners at national conventions in Washington, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Dallas, we agreed it was one of the great untold stories of the decade. Although little pieces of it appeared from time to time in stories about how illiterate college graduates were, the skyrocketing tuition rates, and grade inflation, no one had as yet strung all the parts of it together to deliver the inconvenient truth: most American college campuses had been transformed into something closer to adolescent resorts than institutions of higher learning.

By 2005, when I first watched John Merrow's groundbreaking PBS documentary *Declining Grades*, exposing the true conditions on college campuses, I had collected a cabinet full of newspaper and journal articles, e-mails, and copied documents. I also tape-recorded and wrote down exchanges I had with students, administrators, and faculty at my college. I assigned my journalist students to look into some of the abuses. The students often had to use the Freedom of Information Act to gather information the college did not want made public.

I began to see how college administrators were misusing laws meant to protect students' privacy to cover up abuses that they didn't want the public, the press, or parents to know about. Despite the fact that my college was public and supported by taxpayer money, vast amounts of data were kept secret or, worse yet, deliberately distorted to protect the college's image and marketing position. Students who committed felonies like rape, assault, and arson were handled in secret campus judicial board hearings that were closed to everyone on campus. The results were never made public, despite many students' requests and Freedom of Information Act challenges. My college, like hundreds of other colleges around the country, was deliberately hiding its high crime rates and even lying on federal forms requiring full disclosure of campus crimes.

As my files grew, it began to appear that a large segment of the higher education industry was involved in a massive fraud in which parents, students, and taxpayers were being hoodwinked into paying for one thing—a college education—but were actually getting something entirely different—a five-year (or longer) party, where education was no longer required. It was a classic bait and switch. Parents were asked to pay tuition that increased each year at two to three times the rate of inflation, yet faculty salaries and spending for instruction remained constant. Most of the classes that freshmen and sophomores attended were not even taught by a full-time professor but by a part-time adjunct instructor, who was paid the minimum wage, didn't have an office, and wasn't invited to department meetings.

Where was all this tuition money going if not for education? The answer, I found, was that it was being used to pay for an ever-expanding number of administrative positions. Each year, colleges added assistant vice presidents, deputy deans, or directors for non-educational programs like graduation ceremonies, student activities, student nutrition, multi-culturalism, service learning, and student involvement. Salaries for administrators were also growing at an alarming rate. Some college presidents were paid over a half million dollars per year. The other main reason for the tuition hike was the frenzy of campus construction, where colleges added multi-million dollar student centers, water parks, hot tubs, million-dollar workout centers, and climbing walls in a never-ceasing competition with other colleges to add the latest perk to attract more students. Even in the current

recession, most college campuses are perpetual construction zones where there seem to be as many hard hats as baseball caps, and massive cranes and yellow construction markers are a permanent part of the landscape. Most of these buildings had no direct educational purpose but were designed to provide the frills that high school graduates looking for a place to party said they wanted.

When I discussed with parents what college classes were like today, they simply refused to believe it. How could college graduates be functionally illiterate? How could all that tuition money be wasted on administrative salaries and frills with little connection to instruction?

The idea for this book developed from those discussions with parents as I attempted to show how low higher education had fallen and how only one dollar in five of their tuition money was spent on instruction. Although many parents were aware of the term “party schools,” for example, most seemed to have no idea how dangerous unsupervised binge drinking had become. Wikipedia defines a party school as a “college or university that has a reputation for heavy alcohol and drug use or a general culture of licentiousness.” Estimates vary on how many party schools exist in America, but there are far more than the twenty listed on the *Princeton Review*’s annual list. But the problem reaches beyond the party school phenomenon to a related one that I call *subprime* colleges, where diplomas are being awarded to students who don’t deserve them. Many of today’s college students are not even aware that they are supposed to be learning things in college. For many of them, college is a simple cash-for-diploma transaction. They pay their tuition money and purchase a diploma. Education at these colleges is strictly optional. The 10 percent minority who want to learn are allowed to do so; the vast majority who are only there for the party get the same grades and are awarded the same diplomas.

Not all colleges and universities are party schools. Many of them still cling to the notion that education, not student entertainment, is their primary mission. And many students who attend party schools are still able to learn and resist the ubiquitous temptations to misbehave. But few colleges, from first-rate research universities to the Ivy League, remain untouched by the changes in educational priority I describe here.

I left my teaching position in 2007, right after the dean threatened to put me on probation unless I made my classes more student-friendly by removing grammar from my lesson plans and showing more movies. The administration had already expressed its frustrations with my concerns about the decline in the quality of teaching and my students’ continued filing of Freedom of Information Act requests. Besides, I had a book I wanted to write—this one. I had a message that I thought parents and taxpayers needed to hear.

This book—written by a college faculty member who watched as his college was transformed into a party school and a subprime college, a parent, and a former education reporter of twenty years—is aimed at parents of college students and soon-to-be college students about what really goes on at many of today’s colleges and universities and why. I will spell out in detail what’s wrong with today’s colleges, how it got that way, why it matters, and what can be done to restore the *higher* to higher education. It is my sincere belief that many parents are wasting tens of thousands of dollars sending their children to colleges where they will learn very little. These colleges award empty diplomas to

many employers now understand are nearly worthless. By exposing these practices, I hope that I can be a part of the process of reform.

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In these pages, I'll explain what you can do to make sure your children don't waste their college education money. I'll talk about the red flags to look for to determine whether your child's prospective colleges are more interested in keeping their students happy than in giving them the education they deserve.

I am a firm believer in higher education and what it can do for the bright children of America, but what is going on at hundreds of campuses today is not higher education or even lower education. It's not really education at all, just one big, non-stop party.

## How Retention Replaced Education at America's Colleges

A generation ago, when parents sent their children to college, they knew what they were getting for their money. College was the magic doorway that opened up the American dream and those who passed through its gates could expect wealth, success, and a life full of meaningful engagement with the world. Students who survived the hard work and hours of serious study were welcomed into the ranks of society's leaders, both within their own communities and in national affairs. A bachelor degree was the certificate that proved to the world that the bearer had mastered key skills, learned how to solve problems through critical thinking, and demonstrated the wisdom necessary to participate in the world of enlightened endeavors.

Because colleges accepted only the best and brightest students, just getting in the door was an accomplishment celebrated by parents and students alike as a milestone in their professional development. Those who gained admittance were already a part of the elite, the leaders of tomorrow. The student who received a college acceptance letter had made the first cut for inclusion on the intellectual all-star team.

The mission of colleges was clear. They were ascetic refuges from the outside world, dedicated to knowledge and learning. They were communities of scholars where free thought was encouraged and young minds were nurtured and taught how to think. It was a place where highly trained experts passed on the knowledge and wisdom of the ages to a new generation. This mission had remained essentially unchanged since the Middle Ages and its roots could be traced back to ancient Greece.

Of course, there had always been students who got into trouble. Many students were, after all, adolescents and prone to all kinds of misbehavior, from swallowing goldfish and packing telephons in booths to all-night parties in the fraternity house. There were, however, limits to higher education's tolerance for misbehavior. Professors and administrators knew that an important part of their jobs was to serve as the gatekeepers who weeded out the poor-performing and lazy students from the more serious majority. Students who consistently scored poorly on exams, failed to read assignments, or didn't bother to show up for class were eventually directed to the college's exit door. It wasn't just punishment for substandard performance; it was a way to ensure that high standards were maintained so that the college degree would be awarded only to those who earned it. This, in turn, guaranteed that the degree itself retained its high value for those who did the hard work and demonstrated that they deserved it.

If you entered a college classroom a generation ago, you would have found a professor at the front of the room lecturing or leading a discussion about one of the important topics on the syllabus.

Students participated or at least pretended to be interested in the topic. There were questions that led to discussions, which led to a deeper understanding. The vast majority of students understood that their role in higher education was to take the time to prepare for their classes by reading the assigned texts and coming to class ready to participate in the discussion. Studying was what students did and that was why they were there.

To ensure that the entire process worked smoothly, there were accreditation organizations that oversaw each step in the college education process, ensuring that standards were kept high and that colleges lived up to their primary mission: education.

Employers understood that a job applicant who held a bachelor's degree was guaranteed to be of a higher intellectual quality than a high school graduate. Certified college graduates possessed not only a wide array of basic knowledge but the abilities to learn quickly, to make logical decisions when presented with problems, and to discuss matters in a sophisticated and intelligent fashion.

Today, unfortunately, almost everything you just read about colleges is no longer true.

The inconvenient truth is that only the best colleges in America still consider "education" to be their primary mission. Instead, since the early 1990s, colleges have been reinventing themselves using a business model, transforming themselves into Diplomas Inc., run by a new breed of college administrator more interested in retaining customers than in educating students. As a result of this change in focus, hundreds of college campuses have been deliberately transformed into havens of adolescent hedonism, where student misbehavior has become the norm and college administrators allow it because they don't want their student customers to take their tuition money somewhere else. In an all-out effort to attract and retain as many student customers as possible, administrators have given students exactly what they said they wanted: more parties and less education. Dining halls have been enlarged and reinvented as gourmet food courts and campuses have been tricked out with hot tubs, climbing walls, workout centers, water parks, and wide-screen television sets. Dormitories have been torn down and replaced with luxury condominiums.

The hard work that used to be required has been eliminated because students said they didn't want to do it. Don't want to read books? No problem! Reading them is no longer required. Grades too low? Forget it. We'll use a "grading curve" to transform your F magically into a B. Too busy to write a term paper? We'll waive the requirement for you! A new generation of students with a sense of entitlement demands Bs just for showing up and colleges, ever eager to keep their customers satisfied, are granting their demands.

Focused on increasing their revenue stream, today's party school colleges squeeze as many students as possible onto their campuses at the highest tuition they think they can get away with for the longest possible amount of time. To make their campuses more "student-friendly" and prevent their customers from dropping out or transferring to another campus, colleges have dumbed down their programs, sometimes to elementary school levels, and inflated grades so that nearly everyone gets a

A or a B. Although there have always been student drinking parties, what has changed is that today the parties have become the main student activity at a majority of campuses, taking up far more time than attending classes or studying. Colleges used to be a place where students who were getting a education took some time off to drink; they are now places where students who came to party spend a few hours a week taking classes. A large percentage of party school students admit that they chose their college not because of its academic standing but because of its reputation as a party school, with minimal academic demands and maximum opportunities to enjoy themselves.

Party school administrators and faculty are aware of this decline in academic rigor but minimize its impact by calling themselves “non-elite” colleges and defend the decline in standards with the excuse that the unprepared and disengaged students that make up most of their student bodies probably would not have gone to college at all in previous generations. But is these students’ college attendance really an improvement if schools dumb down their programs and inflate grades to make students happy? And is it really worth tens of thousands of dollars to attend a college that is really nothing more than an adolescent resort?

Flunking out, which used to be the primary consequence for disengaged students who slacked off, has been nearly eliminated by party school administrators who think failing a student is a nonsensical rejection of a paying customer with cash in hand. These administrators have deliberately changed the priorities and rules of higher education to make it nearly impossible for students to fail. Professors are encouraged to make their classes student-friendly, and that means no outside reading assignments, no difficult concepts, no boring discussions, and no tests. Instead, they are encouraged to show movies, bring in guest speakers, and develop classroom presentations that are more “entertaining.” Many today’s party school classes take their cues from reality television, quiz shows, stand-up comedians, video games, and three-ring circuses. They are long on fun but short on learning, but neither administrators nor students complain because both are happy. Students get diplomas without doing any work and administrators get to cash their ever-larger tuition checks.

Although colleges would still prefer that students actually learn something during their time at college, it’s no longer required. Party schools have made education an optional activity. The small minority of students who are engaged in the education process and really want to learn something at college—about 10 percent according to the National Survey of Student Engagement—can still get a education as long as they avoid the temptations to misbehave that the majority of students constantly toss in their way. The majority of today’s party school students take advantage of the “slacker tracks” through the curriculum, which allow them to obtain a diploma without reading a book, writing a term paper, or having a serious discussion. Professors are rewarded by the administration for keeping student grades high and keeping failures to a minimum under the official party school policy of retaining students at all costs. Today, 90 percent of college grades are either an A or B, where A is for the students who complete their work on time and B is for the lower half of the class who couldn’t be bothered. All other grades are essentially off-limits because they discourage students and might tempt them to drop out. The minority of students who study hard in school and get a good education are awarded the same grades and the same diplomas as the students who did as little work as possible. So where is the incentive to study hard if the high-performing students end up with the same grades and the same diploma as the slackers? In this way, party schools actually discourage student engagement.

the education process. There is absolutely no reward for hard work.<sup>1</sup>

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Party school policies also encourage students to stay in school longer than the four years that it is supposed to take to get a bachelor's degree. It now takes the average college student six years to complete a four-year program, adding a 50 percent surcharge to the advertised sticker price. Administrators make it easy for students to drop classes after they enroll, which means that students pay for a class without earning any academic credit. Colleges routinely fail to schedule classes that students require for graduation, forcing them to stick around for another semester or two. Students are permitted, even encouraged, to take less than a full load of classes. For students, that means more time to party; for administrators, who charge the same tuition no matter how many courses a student takes, it's an easy way to squeeze out a little bonus tuition money from their students.

With academic demands at a minimum, party school students have dozens of hours a week for which they call *socializing*, which is their code word for drinking themselves into oblivion. Studies show that nearly half of American college students abuse alcohol, but at party schools, binge drinkers make up the majority of the student body. Students whose self-abusive drinking habits were kept in check by parents and school officials when they were in high school arrive on campus at the beginning of their freshman year to find that there is no longer any supervision at all. Arrests for public intoxication, public urination, assault, sexual abuse, and DUI begin the day the students move in and continue through the semester. Hundreds of party school students drink themselves to death each year. By the end of the first year, a quarter of the freshman class has dropped out, not for academic reasons, but because they simply could not remain healthy while regularly staying up all night and consuming massive amounts of alcohol.<sup>2</sup>

Party school administrators are, of course, well aware of this abusive pattern, but they claim their hands are tied because the students are legally adults and therefore free to make their own choices about how they spend their time. The reality, however, is that colleges that take a strong stand against student drinking by expelling repeat offenders or making their campuses alcohol-free find that their applications drop off significantly. Students looking for a place to party for six years are not likely to choose a college with a reputation for being tough on underage drinking. There are plenty of party schools around that deliver a different message to students: sign up here and you can have the time of your life.

The reason so few parents and taxpayers are aware of this dramatic deterioration in the quality and rigor of higher education is that most colleges have adopted strict confidentiality policies that deliberately take parents and the public out of the loop. Parents are prevented from talking with teachers, looking at their children's grades, or finding out what disciplinary actions their children have been involved in. Faculty members are instructed never to talk with parents, even if they call on the telephone or show up at the door. Party school administrators are fully aware that if enough parents and taxpayers found out what they were really getting for their tuition and tax money, they would soon be called to account.

The transformation of American colleges from rigorous academic institutions into party schools

began in the early 1990s, when high schools began turning out a higher percentage of poorly prepared students unable to cope with the demands of college classes. With reading, writing, and mathematical skills in the elementary school range, these students were not able to read college textbooks, write term papers, or understand a college lecture. This created a schism within the academic community with one side advocating dumbing down the curriculum to the incoming students' level to keep them in school and the other half demanding that rigorous standards be maintained, even if it meant a high percentage of students failed. This tended to break down along age lines, with the older professors defending academic standards and the younger ones advocating dumbing down the college.

It was at this crucial point that a new kind of administrator began taking over the reins of power at American colleges. These new administrators had more in common with Gordon Gekko than they did with Aristotle. They were armed with degrees in business administration rather than in education and had backgrounds or at least training in subjects like marketing, public relations, and management. These new administrators saw that the real problem with colleges was that they were not being run like what they really were—businesses.

To these new administrators, colleges were models of inefficiency because they refused to listen to the demands of their customers—the students—and were therefore always in danger of losing their market share to colleges that did a better job of customer relations. Money was being wasted on things students didn't care about—like libraries and seminars—and too little was being spent on things students said they really wanted—like hot tubs and wide-screen television sets. Colleges, they said, consistently made the wrong decisions for the wrong reasons. Why didn't colleges have balance sheets and profit and loss statements? Where were their plans for increasing their market share? Where were their customer surveys? Why weren't they targeting their markets better and giving their customers what they said they wanted, not what colleges thought they needed?

In the past, the prime mission of colleges was to ensure that students met high enough standards that they would *earn* a college degree. Now it was considered sufficient if the students *paid* for a college degree. The concept that students were supposed to learn something in college didn't fit in the business model.

At conferences all over the country, business coaches ran seminars for college administrators eager to adopt the new college-as-business model. This made the question of whether or not to dumb down the college moot. Colleges that refused to cater to the demands of their student customers would soon find themselves with a lot of empty classrooms. Colleges had to dumb down or die.

The takeover of American colleges by these new CEO-wannabe administrators with their eyes firmly focused on the bottom line completely changed the power structure of higher education. Faculty were among the big losers. In the past, teachers were more than just paid employees who punched the clock and collected their pay. Traditionally, professors shared in the administration of the college and had the power to oust a president who lost their confidence. Today, placated by jobs that require only a few hours of teaching per day, four months of paid vacation, and regular sabbaticals, most of the faculty have surrendered to the idea that academic standards must be lowered

accommodate students who sign up for the party and not for an education. That leaves faculty plenty of time to do what they really care about—their research.

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The real problem with the new business model, however, comes from treating students like customers. A generation ago, students were thought of as powerless blank slates, the intellectual trainees who were required to meet the college's standards or wash out and be shown the door. Those who met the standards were granted a diploma that certified they had mastered the wisdom of the ages. Under the business model, however, students were rewarded with a diploma not for what they learned but because they paid their tuition bills on time. Under the business model, colleges moved dangerously close to becoming diploma marts where students did little more than purchase the certificates. A surprising number of my students voiced this exact attitude in discussions with me in my office. "I'm paying a lot of money to go here," they would say, "and I deserve a better grade than this!" For these entitled student customers, the old idea that you were supposed to *earn* a grade and diploma by studying was an entirely foreign concept. For them, it was strictly a cash-for-certificate transaction and learning was not part of the deal.

Treating students like customers altered the campus power structure in other ways. A primary goal of the new party school administrators was to keep their student customers happy at all costs so they would continue to pay their sky-high tuition bills and not take their business to another college. Flunking students, no matter how poor their grades or behavior, became a bad business practice. Students who refused to read textbooks, who didn't show up for class very often, who failed tests and didn't participate in class, were allowed to get away with it over and over again. Students who drank themselves into unconsciousness, sold drugs, and even committed arson, rape, and assault were let off easy by college judicial boards so they could be retained as paying customers.

There was, in fact, only one mortal sin that could not be forgiven, one offense that would, without fail, cancel their invitation to the five-year party. That was failure to pay their tuition bills on time. Some of my best students told me they were about to be expelled because they had run out of money and didn't want to take out any more student loans. One student told me his name had been taken off the graduation list until he paid for a parking ticket. For these deadbeat students, there was no mercy. The administrators who had been so lenient and understanding about all kinds of other offenses became angry bill collectors, debt collectors who threatened termination if students failed to cough up the cash.

While the old school college administrators evaluated themselves on how successful their students became after graduation, party school administrators have become obsessed with a single number on the student's record: the bottom line. How much income does this student generate for us? They multiply the number of students at the college by the annual tuition rate times the number of years it takes them to graduate. This bottom line number could be improved by crowding in more students, raising the tuition rate, or keeping students in the system for more years. It should come as no surprise then that party school administrators have concentrated on raising all three of those numbers.

This may seem strange because most colleges are non-profit organizations and therefore unable

generate a true profit, but money is still power, no matter how you acquire it. Colleges with excess funds could give their administrators big pay raises, hire more administrators to lighten the load with many hands, and pay for non-stop construction projects designed to attract even more students. It was the winner-take-all strategy taught at business schools. More students—that is, more customers—meant more profit, which would enable the college to build more dormitories and dining halls to accommodate even more customers in a never-ending spiral of expansion. At the same time, excess revenue allowed party schools to add the kinds of expensive frills—like water parks and climbing walls, in some places—that they knew students were looking for.

Party schools call this competition to attract students the “arms race,” where they rush to add the latest student-friendly frills to smash the competition in the same way that rival software companies seek the “killer app” that brings customers clamoring to their doors. Today, college promotional booklets referred to as “view books” are full of photos of students partying, students playing sports, students eating and playing in their dorm rooms. They resemble in many ways the brochures for luxury resorts or cruises. What’s missing from them are photos of students in class, students reading books, or students studying. To even a casual observer of these materials, it’s clear that the main attraction of a college education is no longer education. It’s a five- or six-year cruise on the S.S. Party Barge and party schools do their best to deliver what they are advertising.

At the other end of the college process, party schools have flooded the job market with tens of thousands of semi-literate, unemployable graduates who aren’t able to follow simple instructions. Even before the current recession, studies showed there were millions of graduates who weren’t able to find suitable work and were forced to take positions as temporary office workers, clerks, pizza deliverers, and cab drivers. To make matters worse, these unemployable party school alumni were strapped with tens of thousands of dollars in college loans with payments averaging \$400 a month. Many of these party school alumni now view their party school education as a kind of scam, promising them high-paying jobs but leaving them drowning in debt.

Meanwhile, party school administrators, following in the footsteps of the industry tycoons they seek to emulate, have increasingly been discovered with their hands in the cookie jar. College administrators have taken kickbacks from student loan companies for directing student business their way and sold the names and addresses of students to credit card companies to be targeted for marketing. Administrators were also found to have cozy relationships with the rich and powerful. “Clout lists” permitted the children of the well-connected to bypass the regular admission procedure. Administrators allowed students with the right political connections to obtain degrees without completing the course work. One study found that salaries for college administrators rose by a third in five years, and that doesn’t include the generous perks that colleges provide for them, including \$5 million homes, private jets, and golden parachute retirement packages.

All of this comes as no surprise to the academics who read professional journals such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which has been publishing articles for more than a decade about dumbed-down classes, low academic standards, inflated grades, illiterate college graduates, the oversupply of graduates, and the antics of college administrators who wanted to emulate the lifestyle of Donald Trump. The mainstream news media doesn’t exactly ignore the problems either. *Forbes*

magazine, the *New York Times*, *BusinessWeek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* have all run articles in recent years about what *Forbes* called “country club campuses.” There is no shortage of stories about skyrocketing tuition increases, the crippling debt and lack of jobs the party school graduates face, high crime rates on college campuses, and drunken parties involving hundreds of students that break out after major sporting events. There are also detailed profiles when a student dies of alcohol poisoning. What the national news media fails to report, however, is how all of these seemingly different kinds of college problem stories are really parts of one big story: colleges have been redesigned for partying rather than studying. And parents and taxpayers, the people who pick up the tab for the five-year party, never question the value of higher education, even when the price increases at three times the inflation rate.

In the following chapters, I’ll explain how so many American colleges turned themselves into party schools and describe what goes on there from the point of view of an insider. I’ll take you behind the scenes to show you how little education takes place in party school classrooms, how infrequently students study, and how their demand for dumbed-down classes and high grades has led to colleges where education has become optional. I’ll also take you on a tour of college campuses showing you the dangerous levels of crime, including assault, rape, and arson, and how perpetrators are leniently prosecuted in the colleges’ own secret court system. I’ll explain how the dominant cult of alcohol consumption creates the last place in America where public intoxication is not only accepted but treated as normal behavior. I’ll describe the steps that college public relations offices take to hide what really goes on there from the public, the press, and parents.

Finally, I’ll show you how the low achievement levels of graduates and the high cost of party school tuition have financially damaged tens of thousands of party school graduates who are unable to find the highly paid jobs they were promised and are forced to make student loan payments of \$400 a month for decades. In the final chapter, I’ll outline the steps that parents and legislators can take to cancel the party school system. It’s essential that we restore the rigor that American colleges need to train the leaders of tomorrow to compete with economic challenges from Asia in the coming decades.

## Maximizing Profits at the Students' Expense

When party school administrators shifted their primary mission from educating students to maximizing profits in the 1990s, it worked because there was something in it for almost everyone. The dramatic increases in tuition turned administrators into powerful wheeler-dealers, academic Donald Trumps, who could design and construct multi-million-dollar campus buildings and increase the salaries. For faculty, the new dumbed-down classes and relaxed grading meant they no longer had to put much time and effort into preparing for their classes or grading papers. And the majority of party school students certainly weren't going to complain as their campuses were turned into amusement parks and class requirements for reading, writing, and studying were drastically reduced to make college more "student friendly" and where nearly everyone got an A or a B for hardly any work.

To maintain the party, however, it was absolutely necessary that parents, the press, accreditation organizations, and taxpayers be kept in the dark about the transformations that had taken place. Parents would likely raise a stink if they knew they were paying a higher and higher price for less and less education. Recent surveys, in fact, show that parents are beginning to doubt the value of higher education. Although just a few years ago, 97 percent of parents said sending their children to college was an absolute necessity for their futures,<sup>4</sup> a 2009 survey showed that the percentage of parents who believed this had fallen to just 55 percent. At the same time, the number of parents who had figured out that colleges care more about their bottom lines than they do about education has climbed steadily over the years to 60 percent in 2009. Only 35 percent of parents said they thought college administrators' prime mission was the education of students.<sup>5</sup>

Administrators know that colleges have a growing credibility problem, but many parents still cling to the old-fashioned idea that colleges will protect their children. Each time the news leaks out about illiterate college graduates, students drinking themselves to death, dumbed-down classes, inflated grades, the high campus crime rates, or how those millions of dollars in tuition money are being spent on frills, colleges have to turn up the propaganda machines to turn down the negative news coverage.

But that is only part of party schools' public relations problem. At the same time they try to turn down the coverage of student misbehavior in the mainstream media, they still have to make sure the potential customers, the high school students looking for a great place to party, are getting the opposite message: anyone, no matter how dumb, is invited to the twenty-four-hour party and no one cares if you learn anything or not. Why get a boring job when you can spend the next six years at a deluxe resort while your parents and the taxpayers pay the bill for you? You can have the time of your life without doing any work at all!

The ability of party school administrators to keep these two balls in the air at one time is a credit to their propaganda skills. Although most parents don't realize it, they are the focus of a highly organized, misleading, and expensive public relations campaign beginning when their children are still in high school.

## The Lies Told Along the Golden Walk

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Party schools' public relations campaigns begin with what colleges call "the golden walk," where parents and their high-school-age children tour the campus before they make a decision about which college to attend. The walks are "golden" because they draw in the customers willing to pay the exorbitant tuition bills that finance party school operations. The tours are designed to seem casual and informal with a student walking backwards in front of the group, rattling off statistics, and engaging in supposedly lighthearted banter.

Don't believe it! The golden walk is the result of thousands of hours of careful preparation by college administrators and professional consulting companies that are paid thousands of dollars to make sure that what parents see is what party school administrators *want* them to see. The student tour guide's pitches are as carefully scripted as used car salesman's spiels, thoroughly rehearsed and refined over many hours of practice.

Parents usually have no idea that when they take the "golden walk," they are not getting objective and honest information but a wellcrafted sales pitch. Colleges know what parents are looking for and often engage in misrepresentation, misstatements, and even outright lies to entice them to sign up.

When parents ask admissions officers about the cost of attending the college, for example, they are shown the current one-year sticker price and told to multiply that by four, "with a little extra built in for inflation." This is the first of many lies and misleading statements that college admissions officers tell parents. Many colleges, like the one I worked at, state on their websites and their documents that they are "four-year liberal arts" colleges, even though it is well known that only 30 percent of students graduate in four years. National statistics show that 60 percent of students require at least six years to graduate. Parents will not find this very essential piece of information anywhere on college documents or websites. Lynn Olson, senior editor of *Education Week*, has referred to these additional college years and the costs associated with them as the dirty little secret of higher education.<sup>6</sup>

Parents usually don't learn about these hidden charges until their children bring home the news that they will need another year or two to graduate. These extra years in college are informally known as the "super senior" years and students refer to themselves as being on "the six-year plan." For parents who have attempted to budget for their children's education, these additional costs, which can add as much as 50 percent to the college bill, can be devastating. If they were somehow able to avoid taking out private student loans from predatory lenders up to this point, this is where they are finally forced to capitulate.<sup>7</sup>

Another stop on the golden walk is usually a dormitory room, which the tour guide might describe as "typical." The reality, however, is that the dormitory that parents are shown is the newest residence hall on campus with all the latest frills. These rooms, however, are usually reserved for seniors. When

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