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Intellectual Life at Georgetown

A poisonous — though minority — culture of anti-intellectualism

By Traviss Cassidy

When I decided to enroll at Georgetown University four years ago, I envisioned surrounding myself with students—most smarter than I—who loved research and other intellectual pursuits, not merely for the jobs their good grades would land them, but for the sake of expanding their intellectual horizons.

I never dreamed I would be ridiculed for studying.

One Saturday evening as I approached the entrance to the library to study for a midterm, three students loitering outside each gave me a little smirk. “Isn’t it a little late to go to the library?” one asked. Incensed, I walked past silently.

This encounter is by no means representative of Georgetown’s student body as a whole, but it highlights the poisonous culture of anti-intellectualism present at the school which, while only finding expression in a fraction of the student body, can often create a harmful environment for everyone, including students, faculty, and administrators.

The university is more than aware of the problem. The 1996-7 Intellectual Life Report—written by a select group of department chairs and administrators—presented a rather damning evaluation of the university’s culture of learning. “Too many students evince little interest in what is taught, are rude about appointments and deadlines, and appear to think they are entitled to breaks and high grades,” read the report. In response to the report’s findings, the university took several steps to try to improve intellectual life on campus, including providing more extracurricular opportunities for undergraduate research.

Despite these measures, however, a new committee formed in 2005 con-

cluded that not much had changed. The resulting 2007 Intellectual Life Report declared that “no progress has been made in some areas identified as critically important 10 years ago, including grade inflation, number of hours students study in courses, and the amount of time spent partying at Georgetown.”

The 2007 report spurred another series of reforms that are still in progress. Soon after the report was published, the university instituted a new, more stringent alcohol policy and established two working groups to evaluate other important issues, such as grade inflation. Just recently, the university announced its intentions to incorporate a science requirement into the previously science-free core curricula of the School of Foreign Service and the McDonough School of Business. The university’s recently released “Call to Action: Curriculum and Learning at Georgetown” focuses on curriculum changes aimed at addressing some of the problems identified in the last Intellectual Life Report.

Georgetown’s status as a Jesuit university seemed to give the discussion of campus intellectual life a sense of urgency. Expanding one’s intellect is one way to realize God-given potential; acquiring knowledge can thus be seen as a spiritual act. Furthermore, Jesuit schools exhort their students to seek to better understand the world, not for personal or material gain, but in order to change it. Georgetown’s Intellectual Life Reports found a large portion of the campus community to be lacking in this passion for learning.

I’m sorry to say that I tend to agree.

Far too often I hear students complaining about having to complete time-consuming assignments that cut into their party time. Students seldom speak of the grades they *earn*; rather, they bemoan the grades they *receive*, as if



their effort didn’t factor into that and as if the professor *owed* them something.

This attitude is by no means unique to Georgetown, but surveys have shown that Hoyas party more and study less than students at similarly ranked universities. While the Intellectual Life Reports may have employed too rigid a definition of intellectual life—surely the strong participation in community service and political activism on campus should count for something—it addressed a problem that was glaringly obvious to those of us who see university life as an opportunity to seek knowledge and understanding for its own sake and to the best of our abilities.

I hope administrators will continue to implement reforms which encourage students to engage more earnestly in the academic process, and I hope students respond positively to these efforts and even work to help shape them. I believe that, with a little work, Georgetown can bring itself closer to the Jesuit ideal of “magis”—always pushing its students to aspire for more, learn more, and do more for others. ■

Traviss Cassidy is a Georgetown graduate, editor of the Georgetown Voice, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary.