“Excuse You!” Rethinking Student Integrity in the Age of Academic Entitlement

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Academic entitlement or “I deserve success because I think so” is one of the latest learner calamities to befall formal education. Particularly in tertiary education, notions and attitudes such as “I received a bad grade because of the teacher”, “Tell me why I did not get an ‘A’”, “It is already the morning, I have yet to receive a reply to the email I sent last night”, “do extend my deadline in-lieu of my personal matters”, and “I do not agree with you, so expect to hear from your superior”–have in the last few decades become pervasive in academic environments. Equally incredulous and ungraspable are how successful this fascinating brand of student misconduct has been in taking liberties with the academy, in afflicting educational institutions–in leaving the hands of stakeholders and purists up in the air (Curtis, 2022., Gautam, 2022., Kinne, 2022., Bertl, 2019., Stiles, 2017., Boswell, 2015., Macfarlane, 2014., Boswell, 2012., Hartman, 2012., Achacoso, 2002.). The very idea of “you owe me because I paid fees”, while half amusing and half appalling, is the main amplifier for the upsurges of classroom power differential narratives and student motivation and satisfaction related woes for tertiary institutions across the world (Tracie, 2022., Knepp, 2022., Lin, 2017., Frey, 2015., Kazoun, 2013.). Researchers recognise it as a by-product of self-importance–an earlier and equally bothersome social construct–calling this gross, overly favourable evaluation of self a form of *narcissism* (Whatley, 2019., Schaefer, 2013., Singleton-Jackson, 2011., Campbell, 2004.). I admit to the frustration in my tone, perhaps unbecoming for a commentator expected to be impartial or at least willing to exercise linguistic restraint in light of the multifaceted situation. But having been kept at my desk and up at night over this student incivility for over a decade, and if even our scholars, who the more surgical of us are at a loss in finding a more neutral word than “narcissism” for this academic ailment, I find it best to avoid soft language and–I say this with some feeling–deal with it for what it is.

Academic entitlement

But before that–what *is* academic entitlement? How does it look like? It certainly is not as simple as a lousy attitude. In fact, the term “academic entitlement” is so general it does not even hint pomposity; it appears reductive and impedes consideration of its various dimensions. My experience as an educator showed me that it is no less than a compound concept entangled with social sciences and in cahoots with processes such as consumerism, individualisation, and globalisation. Researchers regard it as “entitled expectations and externalised responsibility” (Bonaccio, 2016), psychologists think of it as “the tendency…to expect good marks and positive feedback for their schoolwork, regardless of the quality…” (Melbourne Child Psychology, 2024), and in the thinking of mental health experts–a “propensity to hold an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility.” (Jeffres, 2014). As attentive as we may have been, carefully delineating and partitioning, producing numerous definitions, treatises, and sophisticated understandings that wound up in dictionaries, that surfaced in empirical studies, and that are weaved into rich stories–academic entitlement as an investigative topic remains, if not enigmatic, complex and uneasy to approach. Questioners are careful not to oversimplify because they know that the phenomenon is non-unifactoral, nuanced by retail-business mentalities (Singleton-Jackson, 2010), ramifications of academic inflation (Ballard, 2004), employment relations (Peirone, 2017), social inequalities (Glater, 2017), quality of parenting (Fletcher, 2020), cultural and environmental influences (Crone, 2020), personality and individual sensibilities (McLellen, 2017, Greenberger, 2008.), so on and forth. While it certainly does not help that institutions continually expose themselves to the growing demands of students and their families for commercial reasons, the purpose of this chapter is not to criticise causes or crucify culprits but rather, ponder responsibly about what should be ahead. Whatever form academic entitlement may take, it always has a hold on *student integrity*: concessions can always be more accommodating; rules can always afford to relax ever more slightly; protocols can always be calibrated; students can have even more say in their academic journey. At this point, specialists and experts will warn me against assumptions and bias, against blind spots and obtusity, so I make it clear that I am simply offering stories from my own experience, in a way that does not require dismantling of the concept or looking beneath its surface. I have no staggering reveal or grand philosophising to offer, no far-reaching theories or clever critique of the larger culture in store–just literal, factual observations of an educator who has had the opportunity to interact with a wide-range of higher education students.

10 actual scenarios

Below are ten actual scenarios that occurred during my first ten years teaching in higher education.

A polytechnic student with a 4.0 GPA worked as an intern at an events company and was criticised for her poor work performance, which included not turning up for work on weekends (the company did most of their shows on weekends). She lodged a complaint to the authorities and rallied her parents to resist company practices because she felt it was "right".

A part-time adult student who attended a professional development course at a university submitted a piece of work that did not fulfil the assessment requirements and argued that his professional experience precedes the grading rubrics, that the grader ought to be "flexible" and "in tune with the industry" by going beyond the assessment criteria to assess him. He aired his annoyance with the management, which progressed from a ruckus to a plea, and was eventually given a chance to resubmit because he claimed that his career had depended on the certification.

Another part-time adult student who signed up for a six-week synchronous online course with a private higher education institution had his video camera turned off most of the time during lessons and was unresponsive when called upon on multiple occasions. Upon failing his live assessment at the end of the course, he told his assessor, who was also his teacher, that it was not his fault because the teacher's "high class English" was hard to understand and the course content was difficult to follow. He then asked to be reassessed, and that his teacher provide a recorded demonstration.

At the end of a particular semester, more than 30% of a class of 25 higher education students indicated in their end-module feedback that their lecturer should "be less strict", "give more 'A's and 'B's", "make lessons more engaging", "help plan our study in order to do well for the module", and "be more proactive in checking on the students' academic progress". This was despite repeated reminders for punctuality and assignment deadlines, and the providence of pre-class learning materials and weekly formative comments given through the course of the 13-week module.

A foreign tertiary student at a private higher education institution who was late in handing in his work for an entire semester continually cited internet and hardware issues as excuse. When he was eventually exposed for his tardiness, he was adamant that he had completed the assignments. Later, he revealed in a counselling session that he had thought that it was a "pay-for-a-diploma" programme and was given an extension to submit the entire semester's worth of assignments.

A polytechnic student who could not wake up in time for class (revealed by her classmate under the lecturer's investigation) continually applied for Leave of Absence and told her lecturer that she was unwell had expected special treatment (both explicitly and implicitly), including additional tuition and quick response to text messages. When her expectations were not met, she wrote a complaint e-mail to the head of school and an investigation was launched.

Another polytechnic student who attended less than 50% of the classes handed in an incomplete piece of work for her end-module summative assignment. The marker contacted her through e-mail and Microsoft Teams (an online, cloud-based meeting and collaborative platform) and awarded her a chance to turn in the missing components. When she finally responded a few days later, the grade had been finalised, to which she claimed was unfair as the grader had contacted her on a weekend. She lodged a complaint to the module chair and her academic mentor and was awarded an extension.

In a tertiary music course, one out of two music students left the course abruptly during the semester, causing the lecturer to make adjustments to the module in order to attain the Learning Outcomes that had already been set, including moving the class to the weekend so that it could combine with another similar class. When the student left the country without notice, the school cancelled classes only to resume them near the end of the semester, when the students returned. The lecturer was then given two weeks to complete the rest of the module (over six weeks of content) with the students.

An undergraduate student mistook an in-person class for an online, synchronous one and was marked absent. She wrote to the lecturer, saying “I find it unfair that we were marked absent, and I would appreciate if you could help me change my attendance if possible” (there were others who did not show up). This was despite a reminder given in the previous lesson and a follow-up e-mail. The same student was subsequently late for most of the lessons for the rest of the semester.

A group of undergraduate students gathered at the school café for an online, synchronous open-book examination. The examination was hosted on the school’s Learning Management System. As the students attempted the exam, they were on also Zoom (a cloud-based meeting and collaborative platform) with their video cameras turned on. During grading, similar answers were spotted for one of the open-ended questions. There were no visible signs of communication during the examination. When contacted, the students in question denied cheating and claimed the probe to be prejudiced, as the instructions from the lecturer did not specifically bar physical, non-verbal communication.

Academic Cheating

Academic cheating–any form of unethical behaviour within an academic environment–happens when favourable views of self are met with opposing, external appraisals, and when an individual with an inflated sense of self-view or self-esteem does not have the matching skills (Greenberger, p. 1201). Factorising the earlier mentioned cases, it is clear that one’s enlarged self-importance has a direct influence on the disavowal of academic responsibility. The stronger the focus on students’ desires and feelings, the blurrier and fuzzier the principles that govern their academic integrity–which brings us to a few questions: is there something wrong with the desires and feelings of our students? Is there a mismatch of expectations–and if there is–how may the school reach a renewed understanding of students’ expectations and what the institution expects of them? Rather than relying on the chance that individuals will develop *our form of* good practices, should we consider student perspectives instead of constantly being dismayed? Can we be more proactive in recognising students’ understanding on “ideas on cheating, school work, internet use, studying habits, and understanding of academic integrity” (Chankova, 2020)? Can we acknowledge and appreciate the ways in which our students manage stress levels (Baer, 2013), give more care to promoting honest academic endeavours through fostering learning-oriented environments through “improving instruction, enhancing institutional support, and reducing institutional constraints to teaching and learning” (Gallant, 2008) instead of penalising academic misbehaviours? If we can do so, perhaps we can calibrate values, behaviours, and conduct that are acceptable to students, faculty, and administrators of higher education institutions (East, 2012) and provide better quality learning to as many existing types of student profiles today (Luckett, 2017). Once we recognise that the benefits of renewing our “moral high ground” outweighs our pursuit of “we are right, and you are wrong”, we can finally start cleaning up this piece of ruin within academia.

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