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Anti-Intellectualism:

Why We Hate the Smart Kids

The following essay won second place in the 2003-04 Arizona State University Printer's Devil Contest, an annual competition open to all students enrolled in writing classes at Arizona State. Grant Penrod wrote the essay in the fall of 2003 for a first-year composition course.

The football team from Mountain View High School won the Arizona State Championship last year. Again. Unbeknownst to the vast majority of the school's student body, so did the Science Bowl Team, the Speech and Debate Team, and the Academic Decathlon team. The football players enjoyed the attentions of an enthralled school, complete with banners, assemblies, and even video announcements in their honor, a virtual barrage of praise and downright deification. As for the three champion academic teams, they received a combined total of around ten minutes of recognition, tacked onto the beginning of a sports assembly. Nearly all of the graduating seniors will remember the name and escapades of their star quarterback; nearly none of them will ever even realize that their class produced Arizona's first national champion in Lincoln-Douglass Debate. After all, why should they? He and his teammates were "just the nerds."

This instance finds plentiful company in the experiences of everyday life; intellectuals almost constantly see their efforts trivialized in the rush to lavish compliments elsewhere. However, such occurrences present only a faint silhouette of true anti-intellectualism; trivialization seems insignificant when compared with the outright disdain for the educated harbored by much of society. That academia's proponents provoke the wrath of the populace is certain. As an illustration, a commenter under the screen name "ArCaNe" recently posted the following quote on an online discussion board: "Man how I hate nerds... if I ever had a

tommygun with me... I would most probably blow each one of their... heads off" (ArCaNe).

Were this statement alone in its extremism, it could be written off a joke. Unfortunately, it represents just one statement among countless similar sites and postings, a veritable cornucopia of evidence attesting to society's distaste for intellectuals. The question, then, is not whether anti-intellectualism exists, but rather why it exists. Several factors seem to contribute to the trend, including social stereotypes, public examples, and monetary obsession. Any or all of these factors can contribute to anti-intellectualism, and the result is a crushing disregard for the life and achievements of fellow human beings.

Perhaps the most obvious cause of anti-intellectualist tendencies, harmful social stereotypes begin to emerge as early as in high school. The idea of the "geek" or "nerd" of the class is a familiar one to most students, and it is not a pleasant one. One online venter describes the image well: "A+ this and... got a 1600 on my SAT and got all AP class[es] next year woohoo. That's all these people care about don't they have lives damn nerds" ("Dan6erous"). In this respect, the trend to dislike intellectuals stems at least in part from an inescapable perception that concern for grades and test scores excludes the coexistence of normal social activities. Sadly, this becomes somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophesy; "nerds" are excluded from social activity because of their label, and that label in turn intensifies through the resulting lack of social contact. The cycle seems unbreakable. Of course, not all "nerds" are socially excluded; most high school students could readily name a few intelligent people with at least a degree of popularity. The point, though, is that the *image* of intellectualism is disliked as anti-social, and the harms of even a fallacious perception to this effect spread to all of the intelligentsia.

This argument, however, merely accounts for the perpetuation of anti-intellectual feelings. Those feelings must also *originate* somewhere, possibly in the examples set by public figures. Certainly, the image presented by modern celebrities suggests that intellectualism has no ties to success and social legitimacy. As an illustration, the website *angelfire.com* features a

compilation of the names of famous high school drop outs. With such well-known cultural icons as Christina Aguilera, Kid Rock, L. L. Cool J., and Sammy Sosa qualifying for such a list, any drive toward intelligence or education becomes laughable in the eyes of media-inundated young people ("Noted Individuals"). Thus, intellectualism loses the respect that its rigor would otherwise tend to earn it. Uneducated success extends far beyond just singers and sports stars, too; even the current President of the United States presents the image of the success of non-intellectualism. His reputation as a "C" student is widely touted, and his public speeches hardly exonerate his intellectual image. The fact that such a vital public figure can get away with saying things like "It's clearly a budget. It's got a lot of numbers in it," and "there needs to be a wholesale effort against racial profiling, which is illiterate children" reflects rather poorly on the regard in which most Americans hold intelligence ("The Very Long List").

Sadly, the aforementioned examples of uneducated success are even further entrenched by the prodigious wealth of the celebrities involved. For example, Sammy Sosa earned an intimidating eighteen million dollars during the year 2002 ("Sammy Sosa"). Indeed, as a writer for *The Carillon* put it, "In more than a few cases athletes' incomes surpass the gross national product of some third-world countries ("Money, Contracts, and Switzerland"). In the eyes of an ever-watchful public, such the existence of such amazingly affluent yet strikingly uneducated individuals would seem to call into question the necessity and even legitimacy of intellectualism. Certainly, most of the people affected by these media images are teenagers, but these young budding anti-intellectuals carry the sentiments of education-bashing on into their adult lives as well. As an illustration, Robert T. Kiyosaki (no longer a teenager) claims in his book *If You Want to be Rich and Happy: Don't Go to School* that education is now merely "an archaic institution that continues to cling to obsolete practices" ("If You Want"). The tendency to forgo enlightenment for "success" even leaks into the college community now: a recent article by Ethan Bronner states that "in the survey... 74.9 percent of freshmen chose being well off as an essential goal" while only 40.8 percent selected "developing a philosophy"

as a similar goal (Bronner). Indeed, American seems enamored with wealth at the expense of intellectualism. Unfortunately for them, this supposed negative correlation between brains and buying power doesn't even exist; "People holding doctorate degrees earned more than twice the salary of high school graduates" in the year 2000 ("Census").

Regardless of the causes of anti-intellectualism, the effects are clear and devastating; society looks down on those individuals who help it to progress, ostracizes its best and brightest. Some may blame television or general societal degradation for the fall of the educated, but at heart the most disturbing issue involved is the destruction of promising personalities; Ignoring intellectuals both in school and later on in life crushes its victims, as illustrated in the following poem excerpt:

My loud and bitter screams aren't being heard
No one is there to hear them or to care
They do not come cuz I'm a nerd
Dealing with this pain is a lot to bear (F., Casey)

For the sake of the smart kids, we all need to "lay off" a little.

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