

Lessons from a Hunger Strike at Harvard¹

Scott Seider, Harvard Graduate School of Education²

Abstract

A study of on-line postings by Harvard College students in the wake of a campus protest reveals the majority of students to feel little responsibility for the well-being of their campus security guards. These students' reactions highlight the need for universities to become more pro-active in graduating socially responsible citizens.

In his 2007 book *The Trap: Selling Out to Stay Afloat in Winner-Take-All America*, journalist Daniel Brook argues that many of America's best and brightest young adults are dissuaded from pursuing careers in public service because they cannot survive (or at least raise a family) on the salaries those jobs provide. According to Brook—a recent Yale grad himself—large numbers of his cohort who *want* to pursue careers in teaching, social work, public service law, and government wind up in investment banking or corporate law in order to make ends meet. They see such jobs as their only pathway towards buying a home, raising children, paying off their student loans, and living a middle class life. In short, Brook argues, living well requires selling out.

The Trap makes some important points about the role of market forces in pushing young people away from careers in public service. Yet, I also believe Brook lets his generation—the so-called millennial generation—off the moral hook a bit too easily. Specifically, in arguing that market forces are responsible for pushing idealistic college graduates towards corporate careers, Brook (2007) concludes, “A return to more egalitarian economic policies could free talented young people to fight for the social change so many of them believe in” (p.153). The question is whether Brook has his finger on the pulse of what the majority of recent graduates—particularly those from elite universities—*believe in*.

Class Warrior vs. Organization Kid

While Daniel Brook (2007) asserts that today's young people aspire to be agents for social change, the *New York Times* editorialist (and similarly named) David

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² Scott Seider is an instructor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. A former high school teacher, he is a co-author of *Instructional Practices that Maximize Student Achievement* as well as numerous articles on the development of socially responsible adolescents and young adults.

Brooks sees it differently. After a visit to Princeton University in 2001, David Brooks (2001) wrote that, in contrast to previous generations of activists and rabble-rousers, the young adults he encountered are “not trying to buck the system; they’re trying to climb it.” Where *Brook* sees budding warriors for social justice, *Brooks* sees “organization kids”—a riff off the phrase “organization man” coined by Whyte (1956) to refer to individuals who conform to the goals of a large organization in order to get ahead.

The majority of college campuses unquestionably contain a diverse range of students with a diverse range of perspectives, but I fear the pendulum may be swinging toward “organization kid.” In a national survey of college freshmen, Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Korn (2007) report that 72% of college freshmen in 2006 ranked “being very well off financially” as “essential or very important” while only 42% of college freshmen expressed a similar perspective forty years earlier in 1966. Pryor et al. (2007) also report that 69% of college freshmen in 2006 expressed their belief that a key reason to attend college is “to be able to make more money.” Less than 50% of college freshmen expressed a similar belief thirty years earlier in 1976. In the identical survey, college freshmen were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the statement, “Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now.” Pryor et al. (2007) report that agreement with this statement dropped from 75% in 1976 to 65% in 1996 to 58% in 2006. In other words, over the past thirty years, young people have become significantly *more* convinced that the wealthy have a right to keep what they earn. This shift in attitude lends credence to the argument that young people are increasingly preparing for their own ascent up the class ladder rather than a crusade for those on the lower rungs. The “organization kids” are beginning to outnumber the “class warriors.” Clearly, the most vibrant college campuses contain a diverse range of students with a diverse range of beliefs and values—from class warriors to organization kids and everything in between. However, the extent to which a growing proportion of young adults express little responsibility for those on society’s bottom rungs was recently underscored for me at my own university, ironically, through a protest.

A Hunger Strike at Harvard

In May of 2007, eleven undergraduates at Harvard initiated a hunger strike on behalf of campus security guards who students claimed were not receiving fair wages. According to the *Boston Globe*, these students resorted to a hunger strike only after “marches and rallies had produced no results,” and the campus police warned them that staging a disruptive protest “could get them suspended, expelled or dragged out by the police” (Bombardieri, 2007). The 11 students began their hunger strike in early May, and much of the undergraduate campus exploded in protest— *against the hunger strikers*.

The hunger strike lasted nine days. Over the course of the protest, the student-run Harvard *Crimson* published seven Op-Ed columns about the hunger strike, six of which criticized the protesters. Columnist Daniel Herz-Roiphe (2007) wrote that, “The protestors . . . seem to delight in making mountains out of molehills.” Piotr Brezinski (2007) asserted that the strikers’ “willingness to starve, given no extraordinary cause, reflects an unhealthy detachment from reality.” Christopher Lacaria (2007) wrote, “One

cannot help but ask: Don't they have anything better to do?" He added, "Sacrificing study time and much-needed caloric fuel, these strikers send the message that their scholarly well-being should come second to petty labor disputes." Each of these writers seems aghast that 11 of their classmates have prioritized a social cause above their own schoolwork and social lives.

While the *Crimson's* Op-Ed columns express the beliefs of individual students, the *Crimson* also publishes staff editorials that represent the official position of the newspaper's editorial board. In a staff editorial published on May 7th, the *Crimson* acknowledged Harvard's "moral obligation" to pay its workers fair wages, but also opined, "A hunger strike is a wildly inappropriate way to conduct this sort of advocacy... and unbecoming of an academic community." In a staff editorial published on May 14th, the *Crimson* added, "The welfare of security guards does impact the greater Harvard community, but its direct impact on undergraduates is negligible." This assertion that the welfare of Harvard employees has a "negligible impact" upon Harvard students is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Illinois senator (and Harvard alum) Barack Obama's stump speech includes a line that reminds Americans, "We have responsibilities to ourselves, but we also have mutual responsibilities. So if a child can't read so well, that matters to us even if they are not our child" (Nagourney, 2007). In these words, Obama argues that Americans have a responsibility for the well-being of other Americans, whether they live in a neighboring town or all the way across the country. Yet, the *Crimson* asserts that Harvard students' lives are unaffected by the struggles facing marginalized members of their own community—individuals that these students interact with everyday.

While one might be tempted to write off the *Crimson* editorial board as unrepresentative of the larger campus, the majority of Harvard students seemed to agree with the *Crimson*. The Harvard undergraduate community is divided into 12 residence halls where students are randomly assigned. Each of these residence halls utilizes an on-line discussion board through which students may communicate with other students in their residence hall. Students often use these discussion boards to borrow books or request help on problem-sets, but the boards also serve as forums for discussion. The hunger strike became a topic of discussion on the discussion boards of all 12 residence halls. In order to gauge the attitudes of the campus, I examined the message boards of four of these residence halls, which represent one third of the undergraduate student body. Across these four different message boards were 286 postings about the hunger strike. Eighty-two of these postings, written by 37 different students, expressed support for the protesters. One hundred and twelve of these postings, written by 62 different students, expressed opposition to the protest. In short, 37% of the students who posted opinions on these message boards expressed support for the protesters while 63% offered opposition. These findings are consistent with an unscientific poll reported by the *Crimson* that found more than 70% of Harvard students disapproved of either the tactics or the cause of the protesters. It is worth noting that twice as many male students posted comments as did female students, and that male students were also significantly more likely to voice opposition to the hunger strike than were female students.

In reading the comments of the Harvard students who opposed the protesters, it becomes clear that many Harvard students feel little responsibility for the welfare of their campus security guards. The following quotations are from actual posts, but the names are pseudonyms. In one post, Frank O'Malley refers to the security guards as "largely vegetative, unskilled labor" and notes that their low salary "is a problem: their problem." Jonathan Highstreet writes, "Could someone explain why Harvard is obliged to pay people more than their labor is worth on the open market?" In a similar vein, Edward Antonucci writes, "Let's be honest, what do the security guards do that I or you or anyone else couldn't do and for less. . . .When did life become 100% fair? When did rational/socially efficient economics take a back seat to socially desirable politics?"

Other students acknowledge that Harvard security guards should be paid more, but describe this injustice as unworthy of their or their classmates' attention. For example, Gregory Peters writes, "I'm not saying that the security guards don't deserve a higher wage and certain protections, but I just know that there are many more causes and people that deserve this type of effort more than them." Jessica Montgomery writes, "I just think of all the effort that this issue has generated, and I find it sad in light of the state of world affairs." Likewise, Alice Carrera notes, "I personally think that a hunger strike for something so trivial is very disrespectful." I cite these postings, not to affirm or criticize particular perspectives, but rather to demonstrate that few Harvard students seem to conceive of their campus security guards as individuals for whom they hold any particular responsibility. As the *Crimson* noted, in the eyes of most undergraduates, the welfare of security guards has a "negligible" impact upon their everyday lives.

A number of Harvard students reacted to the protest by taunting the protesters. Henry Lee wrote, "Can everyone let me know if they're hunger striking? I'd like to eat your portion of the food in the dining hall?" Another student, Tracy Alford, mocked the hunger strikers by pretending to be one himself. He wrote, "The hallucinations have begun. . . .Will keep updating if I have the strength. Must keep hunger-striking. For the children. So very pretty." Finally, a number of students taunted the protesters by offering facetious reasons why they too were embarking upon hunger strikes. Lance Eddith claimed that, "For the last five years, I have been on a hunger strike against genetics. . . . To that end I am standing up for my right to be thin and sexy."

Perhaps most interesting were the numerous students who placed themselves in the shoes of Harvard administrators. Zach Fisch wrote, "If I were the administration, I'd be pissed and ignore the whole thing too." Rachel O'Connor added, "It always gets on my nerves a little when people look at the total Harvard endowment of \$27 billion and figure the university can do whatever it wants with that money." Jacob Greenman wrote, "Like any organization or person without unlimited resources, Harvard is continuously making cost-benefit calculations. . . .We should respect the university's right to decide whether this trade-off makes sense for the institution." Finally, a number of students characterized the actions of the protesters as "disrespectful." These posts in particular seem to substantiate David Brooks's 2001 claim that America's universities are filling with "organization kids." In stark contrast to the old 70s adage not to trust a person over thirty, many Harvard students seem to feel more empathy for their university administrators than for either the security guards or their activist classmates.

Certainly, there were Harvard students who felt differently. Eleven undergraduates believed strongly enough that all employees at their institution should earn a living wage that they were willing to go without food for nine days to make their point. On the discussion boards of the four residence halls that I examined, thirty-five other students offered postings that expressed their support for the hunger strikers and their cause. For example, Denise Raftery wrote, “I’m happy to see that people are rallying. I’m surprised in general that there is not more activism and political activity at Harvard. For me, the events of the past few weeks have been a welcome change.” Henry Lau added, “I think this is a clear case of Harvard violating its promise to its employees.” Finally, Angela Ashworth wrote even more vehemently:

Just because you see a smiling security guard every day doesn't mean that person isn't facing debt, bills, and the daily struggle to provide food for her/his children at home. Living isn't a luxury, and I think it's within my rights to use what influence I have as a student to make Harvard use its influence . . . to offer workers decent conditions.

Angela writes eloquently and persuasively, and yet nearly twice as many Harvard students who posted an opinion expressed the opposite viewpoint: that the plight of Harvard’s security guards was not their problem, not a problem big enough to warrant taking a stand, or not a problem at all but rather an inevitable byproduct of capitalism. As someone who has worked extensively and intensively with Harvard undergraduates for the past seven years, I take second place to no one in my appreciation for their intellect, curiosity, good spirit, and potential. Yet, reading their postings, I believe there is cause for concern about the lack of empathy and responsibility that the majority expressed for the working-class men and women they pass by everyday and that they will pass (or have already passed) on their ascent up the class ladder. In their postings, it is difficult to recognize the army of budding public servants described by Daniel Brook (2007), whose potential could be unleashed with a little tinkering of our market system. Rather, what comes across is a generation of young adults who believe themselves to bear little responsibility for the well-being of less fortunate others.

The Awful Inequities in the World

I offer this anecdote from the Harvard College campus, *not* to be a curmudgeon shaking my fist and lamenting about “young people today,” but rather because I believe educators and educational institutions must play a larger role and take greater responsibility for the development of socially responsible young men and women. Just a few weeks after the hunger strike ended, Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates came to Harvard as the 2007 commencement speaker. Gates told graduates that he had only one “big regret” about his own student days at Harvard. Gates explained:

I left Harvard with no real awareness of the awful inequities in the world—the appalling disparities of health, and wealth, and opportunity that condemn millions

of people to lives of despair. . . I left campus knowing little about the millions of young people cheated out of educational opportunities here in this country. And I knew nothing about the millions of people living in unspeakable poverty and disease in developing countries. It took me decades to find out.

Similar to Gates, many Harvard students have likely not yet found out about the “appalling disparities” that exist between their lives and the lives of those who have less. In his on-line posting about the hunger strike, one Harvard student, Anthony Miller, wrote of the security guards: “I mean, for \$15.50 I will put on a uniform and patrol a courtyard any time you want! That’s better than dorm crew pays, and I thought I was getting a good deal at \$10.75/hr.” What Anthony has perhaps not yet learned is that the low-wage employment which likely goes toward late-night pizza or perhaps his textbooks does not pay the rent much less support a family in one of the most expensive states in the country. In one of his posts, Marc Bartone asserted, “If I work for Harvard and feel I am being exploited, I would choose to work somewhere else.” Here, Marc seems unaware that, for many Americans, job opportunities can be hard to come by.

In using incidents from my own university to express concerns about young adults and social responsibility, I do not mean to imply that Harvard is a particularly egregious offender in churning out “organization kids.” Harvard students play a role in organizing and operating more than 70 different community service programs in Cambridge and Boston; they run one of the few student-run homeless shelters in the country and have played an important role in the on-going protests against the Darfur genocide. Each summer, Harvard students direct and operate 10 different summer camps that serve more than 1,000 of Boston’s most under-served children, and almost ten percent of Harvard’s graduates have applied to Teach for America in the past several years. Imagine, then, the response on other, less progressive university campuses to a protest on behalf of low-wage campus workers. Or if such a protest would happen at all.

In his commencement address, Bill Gates challenged Harvard’s faculty and leaders to turn Harvard into an institution where every student learns “about the depth of global poverty, the prevalence of world hunger, the scarcity of clean water, the girls kept out of school, [and] the children who die from diseases we can cure.” In short, he argued that Harvard should be a place where “the world’s most privileged people learn about the lives of the world’s least privileged.” Such a proposal seems like an excellent start for any university committed to strengthening the commitment to social responsibility of the students who pass through its gates. In the 19th century, the final graduation requirement at many of America’s universities was a “capstone course” on moral philosophy taken during the student’s final semester of university and taught by the university’s president. Through both the requirement and its instructor, universities expressed loudly and clearly to their students that they expected graduates to apply the knowledge they had spent the past four years acquiring in ethical ways and in service to others. In the 21st century, when the majority of college students report that the primary role of college is to “increase one’s earning power,” perhaps universities would do well to cap off their students’ academic careers in a similar fashion.

A few years ago, I conducted a study of college students who participate in 10-20 hours of weekly community service (Seider, 2007a, 2007b). These students volunteered

in local homeless shelters, elementary schools, hospitals and prisons. My goal was to learn more about the types of experiences that had instilled in these young people such a deep commitment to service-work and social justice. I found that these students attributed their commitment to service to a wide variety of experiences. Several students referenced Bible-studies in which they had participated while others cited classes they had taken on topics ranging from health policy to contemporary world issues. Still other students cited service experiences they had participated in alongside their parents while a few students described particular books they had read such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which led them to see the world in an entirely new light. Interestingly, a majority of these students' experiences had occurred during the freshman year of college. All of these experiences, however, are worth the attention of educators seeking to develop or deepen their own students' commitment to social justice. Helen Keller once noted, "The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker" (Helen Keller, n.d.). Deepening and extending young Americans' sense of social responsibility must come about through the aggregate tiny pushes of many committed educators and institutions. We all need to continue to learn about how (and how not) to push.

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