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## *Phony Empathy, Phony Scholarship*

**Herbert London**

*New York University*

It was recently reported that a number of colleges, including Emory, Kenyon and the University of Rochester, were encouraging some of their students to experience the conditions of homelessness by sleeping outside on gratings or in cartons. Presumably the physical discomfort of this experience provides students with an awareness of the plight of the so-called homeless.

Since most of these students returned to warm dormitory rooms, three square meals and hot showers, it is difficult to assess the level of verisimilitude. As one might guess the students involved in this experience have discovered a new understanding and are actively lobbying for homeless shelters. This discovery resembles a form of secular antinomianism; it also resembles a current manifestation of radical chic, an effort at consciousness raising for privileged students. As one student noted after an evening under the stars, "When I took a shower the next morning, I felt ashamed thinking of all the advantages I have."

Privileged kids suffer from frostbite

and deprivation of a meal and, *voilà*, now they can identify with the homeless. I guess this is what passes for study of sociology. In fact, it would be more appropriate to describe the experience as "preposterism," since by a reasonable standard this is a preposterously phony experience masquerading as a "new learning mode."

The silliness of this exercise merely points to the ambiguity of what a university is. From an institution once described as an "ivory tower" whose purpose would not be compromised by the affairs of state, the university has been transmogrified into the eye of a social hurricane in which students must experience the conditions of society.

It is instructive, I believe, that as demands are imposed on universities and are not resisted, the character of the academy is altered. University catalogues which once described courses in foreign languages, philosophy, science, literature and history now routinely refer to saving neighborhoods and even nations and exposing students to the experience of the world. The value of

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simple exchange between mentor and student that may inspire a thirst for knowledge and that may enrich the soul is an anachronism, a faded memory of education from the past.

On numerous occasions I have heard colleagues refer to the need for student experience. But the claim has a spurious ring to it. If experience is the essence of the emerging education on campus, then my grandfather, who experienced extraordinary adventures on his journey from the Ukraine to the United States, obviously deserves a Ph.D.

As we descend down the rabbit hole of experience, it is curious that as students engage in so-called real world activities like internships and other world-related roles, they seem to know less than their predecessors. In part this is due to the fact that you can study less than was formerly the case in order to obtain a degree and that knowledge itself has been trivialized.

The gatekeepers of knowledge, namely the professoriate, have relaxed standards of attainment. A combination of narrowly defined areas of interest and an obsession to empathize with the designated victims in society has produced absurd courses in "victimology." Moreover, the professionals in this area of study define technical terms to legitimize their programs, often imperiling genuine scholarship.

It is hardly surprising that a new breed of humanities professor has relegated all subject matter to the realm

of ideology and experience consistent with that ideology, denying a quintessential search for truth that undergirds scholarship in the first place. Is it any wonder that public suspicion of higher education is increasing at a rate faster than tuition? Parents justifiably want to know why it is costing them \$30,000 a year to have their sons and daughters sleep outdoors and act as if they were homeless.

In the beginning of the century Thorstein Veblen, noted social theorist, observed that many college students were "trained in incapacity." While that cynical comment applied to some students, it most certainly did not represent the purpose of the academy. As we approach the third millennium, it is increasingly possible that Veblen could be describing the entire academic enterprise. The search for relevance has ended in irrelevance; the pursuit of meaning is ending in triviality and the obsession with experience is rapidly becoming the enemy of scholarship.

Let me emphasize that my argument is not directed against experience in general. Rather, my concern is that experience is becoming a substitute for scholarship. When students can be encouraged to simulate the experience of homelessness as an academic exercise unrelated to readings on the subject and empirical evidence about those in this circumstance, a portion of the professoriate has obviously traveled down the road to pure sensation and little understanding.