

Seven Thoughts about Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books

ROSE HOROWITCH'S ARTICLE in the November issue of *The Atlantic*, "The elite college students who can't read books," got a lot of buzz last fall. It lays the blame primarily on high schools for not assigning novels to their students, shifting instead to brief excerpts or short-form writing activities.

Horowitch certainly identifies a serious cause for concern, but her piece deserves a "close read" nonetheless, especially because it's already leading some advocates to dunk on education reform. Here are my seven thoughts about elite college students who can't read books.

1. High school and college kids should read books! Great books of classic literature, in their entirety. Horowitch and the English professors she interviews make a great case for this. As she writes in her conclusion, "To understand the human condition, and to appreciate humankind's greatest achievements, you still need to read *The Iliad*—all of it." Yes, 100 percent yes.

2. The evidence that high schools aren't assigning books is thin. Almost everything Horowitch surfaces is anecdotal. She asserts that "middle and high schools have stopped asking" students to read whole books, but the only evidence she offers is another *Atlantic* article that's also full of anecdotes but no data. Similarly, she later writes that "middle- and high-school kids appear to be encountering fewer and fewer books in the classroom, as well," and links to a third *Atlantic* article—this one about an elementary school program in New York City that downplays reading whole books. The idea that high school English teachers aren't assigning books to students is, at this point, based on an assemblage of anecdotes and conjecture.

3. Many Ivy League students went to fancy private schools, so be careful about blaming public school reforms for this problem. Horowitch admits this, acknowledging that private schools "produce a disproportionate share of elite college students." But then she claims—again without evidence!—that private schools "have been slower to shift away from reading complete volumes."

4. Don't blame Common Core. You knew she would go there, and she did, writing that the multi-state standards "emphasized informational texts." That's true—but as some of us have been trying to explain for more than a dozen years now, that was intended as guidance across the entire curriculum. The intent was to tackle informational texts in social studies and science, not in English class. It's not too late for schools to examine their instructional materials for high school English

and ditch them if they don't focus sufficiently on novels.

5. Don't blame standardized testing and No Child Left Behind. Of course, Horowitch went there, too. After these reforms, she claims, "teachers at many schools shifted from books to short informational passages," citing interviews with ed-school professors, "followed by questions about the author's main idea—mimicking the format of standardized reading-comprehension tests." I worry that this is happening too much in elementary and middle schools and shouldn't be. But there's very little accountability testing in high schools. So that's a pretty slender reed on which to hang four years of poor instructional practice.

6. Do blame screens. Horowitch makes her most compelling argument here: "Teenagers are constantly tempted by their devices, which inhibits their preparation for the rigors of college coursework—then they get to college and the distractions keep flowing. 'It's changed expectations about what's worthy of attention,' Daniel Willingham, a psychologist at UVA, told me. 'Being bored has become unnatural.'" Note that

screens, unlike Common Core or No Child Left Behind, impact private school students, too.

7. Do blame cheating. Perhaps the most surprising part of these discussions is how few people mention the many ways that kids can get away with not doing the reading and still get a good grade. This is not exactly new. But now kids have Sparknotes—in their pockets—along with YouTube videos that summarize book plots, ChatGPT to write their essays, and plenty of papers for sale on the open market. The problem, then, may not be that schools aren't assigning books, but that students aren't reading them, in part because cheating has become pervasive and socially acceptable.

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IN A WAY, I wish Horowitch was right that the problem is that high schools are no longer assigning books to students. That diagnosis lends itself to a fairly obvious solution: Start assigning books again! But if the problem is that assigned books go unread, that's a much harder nut to crack. It means addressing grading, cheating, cellphones, and more—a comprehensive tough-love approach to schooling. Or we can just blame Common Core!

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