A Critical Time for Critical Thought

Students have long been caught in a tug-of-war between conformity and free thinking

The Student: A Short History
by Michael Roth

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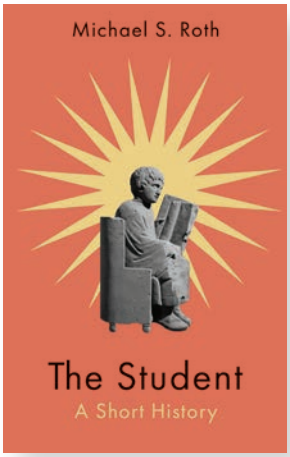
As reviewed by Jonathan Zimmerman

EVERY YEAR, AT CONVOCATION, my university's president tells the incoming freshmen that they can be anything they choose. But somehow, four years later, a huge fraction of them choose to enter one of three fields: tech, banking, or management consulting. As I often tell my students, there's nothing wrong with working in these professions. But there is something wrong with an institution that advertises infinite opportunities, then socializes people into a narrow band of them.

That sabotages thinking for oneself, which Michael Roth enshrines as the central goal of higher education. Roth's heart is in the right place: of *course* college should liberate us from received ideas and give us the tools to cultivate our own. But he knows that they aren't doing that, at least not to the degree that they can or should. There is an enormous gap between our rhetorical commitment to the liberal ideal and our real-world behaviors.



Roth has produced an eloquent defense of the ideal via a brisk history of students and their teachers in mostly Western contexts. His hero is Socrates, who placed self-inquiry ("Know thyself!") at the heart of education. Socrates also thought that students should puncture the pretensions of the powerful—in contemporary language, "question authority"—which helps explain why the authorities in Athens put him to death. His goals were revived in the Renaissance and in Enlightenment-era Europe, where figures like Immanuel Kant and Denis Diderot stressed the need for students to cultivate doubt, criticism, and intellectual independence. So did Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who updated these ideals for American audiences. As Roth acknowledges, the liberatory purpose of education often got buried in the corporate conformity of the modern university: students sat through dull classes during the day and partied at night, preparing for a "utopia of sterilized automated contentment," as the Berkeley student leader Mario Savio complained. But figures like Savio remind us that the Socratic ideal, as Roth insists, remains alive and well, especially in small humanities seminars that create "a classroom of active learners."

I'm not so sure. It's one thing to say that students should engage in deep conversation via small-group seminars. It's another to find the money (where?) to pay for those classes. And it's still another thing to prepare professors who are skilled at leading them.

Many of us aren't. Way back in 1949, the noted University of Chicago psychologist Benjamin Bloom recorded a set of seminar classes and played them back later for the students, who reconstructed what they were thinking at the time. Many students had been watching the clock, wondering when class would end; others were daydreaming about their big date that weekend. Fewer than half recalled "active thinking relevant to the subject at hand," Bloom wrote. And that was at Chicago, which was renowned for its liberal-arts instruction!

Nor does Roth suggest an escape from the meritocratic trap described by Michael Sandel and others, whereby students chase after the shiny object right in front of them (see: tech, banking, management consulting) instead of searching for a vocation that will be personally meaningful. The perceived dangers of falling down the socioeconomic ladder—and of disappointing their anxious parents—are simply too great. Again, one wonders: what is to be done?

Roth's own university (Wesleyan) recently made headlines by eliminating legacy admissions in an admirable effort to make the school more meritocratic. But it's possible that such a move will only accelerate the Darwinian struggle: more meritocrats mean more competition, not less. How about a required gap year of service, with Wesleyan subsidizing the students who can't afford to take it? Or maybe prohibiting on-campus recruiting, where the students see their peers in very nice clothes lining up to interview for very lucrative jobs?


Michael Roth

Or perhaps colleges could ban interviews, tests, and other competitions to join student clubs and organizations. A few years ago, during a class discussion, a student told me she had "tried out" for the Alzheimer's Buddies Club—whose members

visit patients in a nearby hospital—but had not "gotten in." I asked her to describe the process, and she said she was required to write an essay about her motives for joining the club and undergo an interview with one of its officers. When I suggested to the class that the club should admit all comers—and if there wasn't enough room in the van to the hospital, simply draw lots between them—the class went quiet. "Nobody would apply," a brave student admitted, piercing the silence. My heart sank. That which is competitive is valuable; and if there's no competition, there's no value. We have socialized these young people for battle, not the kind of independent thinking that Roth valorizes. And until we change the rules of the game, they will keep playing it.

True confession: I've always been a big fan-boy of Michael Roth. No modern higher-education leader has done more to burnish liberal collegiate values than Roth, who seems downright indefatigable. The guy runs a university, teaches his own classes, and publishes a book every third year or so. I get tired just thinking about it. But there's also something a bit tired about this latest volume, which repeats some old Rothian themes (especially from his 2015 book, Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters) without telling us much that's new. Every month brings a fresh report about how the humanities are on the ropes, if not down for the count. Should we attempt to revive them via required core courses, as Stanford has recently done? Who will teach such classes? And what do we say to the students who don't think they need the humanities—and their promise of intellectual freedom—any longer? Although the jacket for Roth's book refers to the challenge of "machine learning," there's nothing in the text about how we should (or should not) use artificial intelligence in our everyday instruction. What happens to the ideal of thinking for yourself when a computer can think more quickly—and possibly more creatively—than you can?

At the outset of his book, Roth asks the most important question of all: "Are schools truly helping students think for themselves, or are they only indoctrinating them into the latest conventions?" He wants the answer to be that they are nurturing independent thinking, as do I. But where is the demand for it? And what can we do to make more people want it?

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In his now-famous talk to New York City teachers in 1963, James Baldwin urged them to cultivate open-mindedness and self-awareness. "The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not," Baldwin declared, channeling the ancient Socratic ideal. "To ask questions of the universe, and then to learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity." But as Baldwin warned, in the part of his speech that we too often ignore, "no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around." Michael Roth and I want the same thing: a university that nurtures skeptical and independent minds. Like James Baldwin, though, I'm a lot more pessimistic about our ability—and, especially, our desire—to achieve it.

Jonathan Zimmerman is a professor of history of education and the Berkowitz Professor in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author or co-author of nine books, including The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America *(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020) and* Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools, *which was recently released in a revised 20th-anniversary edition by the University of Chicago Press.*