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PSYCHOLOGY

Has Empathy Become the New Scapegoat?

The controversy over Harvard's freshman pledge lends credence to the idea that being kind and being smart are mutually exclusive. Here's why they're not

By [Erika Christakis](#) and [Nicholas A. Christakis @NACChristakis](#) | Oct. 12, 2011

At Harvard College in September, a controversy erupted over the adoption of a “freshman pledge,” which for the first time asked incoming students to sign a commitment to act with respect, integrity, and kindness in order to “promote understanding.” Libertarian commentator Virginia Postrel, [wrote](#) that “treating ‘kindness’ as the way to civil discourse doesn’t show students how to argue with accuracy and respect.” Harry R. Lewis, a former dean of Harvard College and someone with an excellent perspective on undergraduate education, [warned](#) that it impinged on freedom of thought and that “a student would be breaking the pledge if she woke up one morning and decided it was more important to achieve intellectually than to be kind.”

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Has empathy become the new scapegoat in the long-standing concern about academic attainment in American schools? Books like *Academically Adrift* chart the decline in academic rigor on American college campuses, citing the plummeting hours that students spend on studying and critical thinking skills. But there’s also been a troubling, and concurrent, decrease in empathy over the past thirty years. A study of 14,000 college students published in *Personality and Social Psychology Review* in 2011 showed that the majority of college students today are less empathetic than their predecessors of prior decades. And other research even shows that education (like medical school!) can actually wring the empathy out of students.

Many people are squeamish about calls to increase empathy in young people because they wrongly assume that the ability to empathize is incompatible with traits like logic, reason, and impartiality. We’ve now entered a debate about how nice we should be or, rather, how nice we can afford to be and still stay competitive as a society, clinging to the pernicious belief that anything beneficial to young people must be painful and that we are in a rat race that is a zero-sum game.

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In fact, there need be no tradeoff, at Harvard or anywhere else, between intellectual rigor and kindness. This is a false dichotomy, like the belief that a sick person must choose between a competent doctor and a humane one. Indeed, empathetic behavior – listening well, for example – actually makes a doctor better able to diagnose and treat illness, and studies show that when doctors are empathetic, their patients need less medication to relieve pain and less time to heal wounds.

People often equate empathy with gentleness and passivity. But empathy is really just a cognitive walk in another person's shoes. An empathetic person is, fundamentally, a curious and imaginative person. Empathy involves a search for understanding. And we need today's students to understand the world better in order to respond to its seemingly intractable problems.

Many educators agree that the intellectual skills required for the 21st century depend on not only a mastery of facts and figures, but also on complex communication, flexibility, collaboration, adaptability, and innovation. We live in a more open society than ever, with greater mixing of people and ideas.

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The ability to master a new language, to translate scientific findings into policy, or to weave the concerns of one field into the terms of another (the way a Macintosh computer melds engineering and design), requires students to step outside of their own life experience and habits of mind. Steve Jobs had empathy for his customers.

Of course, we can always find examples of world-class thinkers who are oblivious to people's feelings. But that doesn't negate the fact that the vast majority of students will need to assume the perspective of others in order to get ahead in life. We can call this empathy. Or we can call it 21st century learning. It's both. Empathy doesn't always lead to more moral behavior, but it can lead to more intelligent behavior.



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