



HIGHER EDUCATION & SOCIETY

Edited by

Barbara F. Tobolowsky
Pauline J. Reynolds

**ANTI-INTELLECTUAL
REPRESENTATIONS OF
AMERICAN COLLEGES
AND UNIVERSITIES**

Fictional Higher Education

WICHE

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Barbara F. Tobolowsky • Pauline J. Reynolds
Editors

Anti-Intellectual Representations of American Colleges and Universities

Fictional Higher Education

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Pauline and I have been hoping one day to be able to make our ‘Oscar’ speech where we can thank everyone who contributed to our lives and our work. We are glad to finally have that opportunity (even without the Oscar). First, let me share the back story of this book. It was around 2008 when Katherine Chaddock, series co-editor for *Higher Education and Society*, asked me if I might be interested in doing a book about media, because she knew television depictions of higher education were an important part of my research agenda from my graduate school days. The book at that point in time was very different. Needless to recount the reasons, but it did not make that crucial transition from my mind to print—and it stayed that way for many years.

Time passed, as it does, and in 2013, Sarah Nathan, former editor with Palgrave Macmillan, expressed her interest to Katherine in “that book about media” that was pitched to her years earlier. The rest, they say, is history. Along the way, I enlisted Pauline’s help, and together, we revised and reimagined the book and sent the formal proposal to Katherine and Roger Geiger, the other series editor, for their feedback. With their guidance and support, the book has finally taken shape. This is the new, revised version of that original kernel of an idea. Thus, the first big “thank you” goes to Katherine for her ongoing support, Sarah for her long memory, and Roger for trusting us to move forward with this project. Add to this list, Mara Berkoff, Milana Vernikova, and all the folks at Palgrave Macmillan, who helped publish this book, as well as Sara DeMoss and Toni Vakos for additional editorial assistance. Finally, we want to thank our contributing authors—Katherine Chaddock, Christian Anderson, Tamara Yakaboski,

Saran Donahoo, Michael Hevel, and Jon Lozano. There would be no book without their invaluable contributions.

Barbara adds: To this mix, I would also like to thank Linda Sax, who saw a glint in my eye when I talked about media and encouraged me to pursue this interest in my dissertation. Thanks to the rest of my dissertation committee who were the first supporters of this scholarship: Pat McDonough (my chair), John Caldwell, Rob Rhoads, and especially, Lena Astin, who continues to be my role model in life and work. I would also like to thank my colleagues at UT Arlington for their support and collegiality, which opened a space for me to tackle this book. I also thank my friends and family who joined me, off and on, as I logged hours upon hours of time watching television and going to movies throughout my life, never imagining that it was laying the groundwork for this project. Finally, I thank Pauline for joining me in this adventure. Pauline made the book better and the process more fun.

Pauline, here! A few years ago I decided that although it didn't feel like my discipline welcomed my work with popular culture and media, I was going to try and build a community of like-minded academics to talk to and hopefully work with. I nervously emailed faculty I didn't know personally but who had all published or presented work about higher education in movies and TV shows and suggested we get together for breakfast and a chat. Several years later, after conferences, breakfasts, dinners, beverages, and presentations, we now also have a book, embracing old and new colleagues, continuing that first excited conversation. Thanks to Jesse P. Mendez, Saran Donahoo, Tamara Yakaboski, and Barbara for taking that email seriously and for their continuing support and collaboration in this work. We might need a bigger table at our next gathering.

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Finally, Barbara. I came across Barbara's work while I was preparing for my dissertation and was delighted to find someone in higher education who was doing entertainment media work; in fact delighted is an understatement. Never did I think I would be her friend and colleague, or that we would work together on such fun projects. Thank you, Barbara, for accepting my invitation to breakfast those years ago and being such a staunch supporter of my work ever since; you're a pleasure to work with. Here's to our next project!

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Cultivating Anti-intellectualism in the Fictional University

Barbara F. Tobolowsky

It is night. Clocks chime as we see two males walk by stately, imposing, red brick buildings with white pillars set back from manicured grounds. Walking through this park-like setting, the men pass a statue that reads “Knowledge is good” along the way.

As we watch this scene play out, we know we are on a college campus, because it fits our expectations of that location—stately buildings, check; pillars, check; grounds, check; chimes, check. However, this setting is fictional. It marks the opening sequence of *Animal House* (1978)—the irreverent comedy about Greek life at an elite college in 1962. The images conveyed even in a film as outrageous as this one establish expectations of the college experience (Arrendondo, 1999; Osberg,

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Billingsley, Eggert, & Insana, 2012). These media-fueled expectations can affect viewers.

Sometimes audiences are cognizant of lessons they learned from media (Young, 2000). Berger (1996) explained:

All the television shows we watch, all the movies we see, and the comic strips we read, all the videogames we play, are “educating” us, are giving us ideas about what is good and bad, about how to solve problems, about how to relate to other people in society, about what our responsibilities are to others. (p. 4)

However, more often, the lessons may be indirect or outside of the awareness of the viewer (Williams, 1986; Young, 2000), which can make them hard to uncover (Rosengren, 1996). Nevertheless, Berger (1996) and others argue that media play important roles in influencing the public’s attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (e.g., Kellner, 2003, 2009; Weimann, 2000; Young, 2000), particularly if they are repeated over time (Weimann, 2000). However, they do not just influence change; they serve as a mirror to our society’s values, interests, and goals (Douglas, 1995). By investigating media, over decades, much can be learned about the world in which they were created.

As higher education has been a critical issue throughout the history of America, it is not surprising it has also been a subject in fictional media before and after *Animal House*, including Nathaniel Hawthorne’s first novel, *Fanshawe* (1828); the video game, *The Sims 2* (2004); the comic character, *Supergirl* (1964–1968); films like *Ball of Fire* (1942) and *Dear White People* (2015); and television series, such as *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (1994–2000) and *Community* (2009–2015) among others. These narratives have given us vivid characters that are etched in our memories (e.g., Will Hunting, *Good Will Hunting*; Dean Wormer, *Animal House*; Hank Devereaux Jr., *Straight Man*; and Elle Woods, *Legally Blonde*, to name a few) along with messages about higher education. These messages do more than amuse, enlighten, or inform; they offer clues into the public’s attitudes and views of this critical enterprise. However, to date, there have been no comprehensive, detailed analyses of the higher education depiction across media and over time. Therefore, the purpose of this volume is to address the gap in research and provide insights into the public’s views of higher education based on media messages.

MEDIA'S INFLUENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

As stated above, representations of any type may have a far-reaching influence on viewers' actions and values. One apt example of this is in marketing. The entire commercial enterprise is based on the belief that people buy items if they are compatible with their cultural norms (Gunaratne, 2000). Further, successful advertisements not only reinforce but also establish those norms. For example, Starr (1984) detailed how the perception of cigarettes shifted from a practice associated with "immigrants in eastern cities and, more generally, by poorer people" (Starr, 1984, pp. 46–47) at the turn of the century to being viewed as a sign of masculinity, sexual attractiveness, and strength by the late 1970s as a result of media depictions. The image matched the American ideal of "rugged individualism," which was epitomized by "the Marlboro Man" campaign in the late 1950s (Zhang & Neelankavil, 1996, pp. 136–137), which not only sold cigarettes but also sold a myth. Starr concluded that "the image of cigarette smokers in the popular media continue to reinforce the connection" of cigarettes and "the traditional male stereotype" (p. 56).

Although advertisements are obvious efforts to sell products, there are other types of media depictions that serve similar purposes. Product placement prominently displays items in entertainments to achieve comparable ends (Chan, Petrovici, & Lowe, 2015). Although there is conflicting research on the effectiveness of product placement (Chan et al., 2015), one of the more famous examples of its power was in *E.T.: the Extraterrestrial* (1982). Hershey's candy saw a huge increase in sales, because Reese's Pieces figured noticeably in that highly successful film (Tsai, Liang, & Liu, 2007). Depictions can also affect attitudes and behaviors through negative examples. For instance, when Clark Gable did not wear a t-shirt in the film, *It Happened One Night* (1934), sales fell dramatically (*Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 1949).

These overt depictions may affect sales, but other, more nuanced, media representations can also influence behavior and promote values. In one seminal study, researchers in Canada investigated the effects of television on a community that received its first television transmission in 1973. They found that after the town was exposed to television content behaviors once considered inappropriate (e.g., disrespect to elders by using bad language) were now socially acceptable (Williams, 1986). The researchers concluded that television endorsed these new behaviors and established a

new behavioral norm in this community. These findings demonstrate how television depictions influenced community standards.

The Canadian study is unique because it directly links television exposure with changes in behavior. Usually, there are so many variables (e.g., peers, families, communities, socioeconomic background) that contribute to behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking) that it is difficult to unravel the specific effects of media representations on actions or beliefs (Rosengren, 1996). Yet media are often blamed for negative behaviors¹ (Peers, 1999; Carlson, 2002). For example, returning to the example of cigarettes, policymakers, among others, recognized the popularity of cigarettes was a result, in large part, of their depiction in media. Consequently, in 1971, Congress banned cigarette commercials on television and radio once the dangers of cigarette smoking could no longer be ignored (Gildemeister, 2008). However, banning advertisements did not go far enough, because researchers found that youth who watched a lot of television were more likely to smoke even when there were no commercials (Gildemeister, 2008). So, the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences considered depictions of cigarette smoking when they rated films (Cieply, 2007), giving more restricted ratings if films glamorized cigarette smoking. Television followed suit. As a result, few characters (and primarily evil or historical ones) were seen smoking in mainstream television and film.²

Although these examples focus on film and television, media research, more broadly, suggests visual images affect behavior and attitudes even if direct connections are difficult to make (Williams, 1986). In addition, cultivation theorists suggest that images that are repeated and consistent over time shape and reinforce the audience's worldviews (Weimann, 2000). As a result, research has explored the media messages of a wide range of subjects, including the role of women (e.g., Holland & Eisenhart, 1990) and race in society (e.g., Graves, 1999; Gray, 1995), as well as the consequences of casual sex (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009).

Just as images about race may contribute to the perpetuation (or reduction) of racist views (Graves, 1999) or unrealistic expectations of being a woman (Faludi, 1991), the representation of higher education matters because it may help shape the public's perception of college and student life. As Edgerton and Farber (2005) state, "higher education represents a crossroads of our social and political landscape ... addressing the promise and challenges of our contentious, culturally diverse, and fundamentally incomplete democracy" (p. 2). Thus, gaining an understanding of the messages conveyed in media can open a door

into perceptions of this most fundamental institution. The expectations conveyed by these media portraits can affect a student's college success by setting up unrealistic ideas about what it means to be a college student (Tobolowsky, 2001), and unmet college expectations can lead students to dissatisfaction and attrition (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Tinto, 1993). Further, media-developed attitudes can influence the government's (or the public's) support of the entire enterprise (Wells & Serman, 1998).

Because of the potential impact of this work, one might assume that this has been a rich area for research. In fact, some scholars have noted the value in investigating popular entertainments because they are "increasingly the central place where various memories, myths, histories, traditions and practices circulate" (Gray, 1995, p. 4). Thus, they acknowledge that much can be learned from an investigation of popular media about our society and its values. Yet, in spite of these considered views, there has been limited work on the college portrait in communication and popular culture fields, and only a few investigations have been conducted by higher education scholars (e.g., Edgerton et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2014; Tobolowsky, 2001). Moreover, much of the work has focused on a single aspect of college life (e.g., teaching in Dalton, 2010; Dalton & Linder, 2008) or a single film or television series (e.g., *Beverly Hills, 90210* in Byers, 2005; *Gilmore Girls* in Diffrient & Lavery, 2010). The few comprehensive texts looked at a single medium (film or television) and not at the pervasiveness of images across media (Conklin, 2008) or over time (e.g., Edgerton et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, prior media work, though limited, has made critical connections between the representation of higher education to student attitudes and beliefs. Some key findings support the contention that the depictions in popular entertainments do affect student beliefs. For instance, Wasylikiw and Currie (2012) found that exposure to *Animal House* (1978) increased college students' negativity toward their scholarly work, and Gray (1995) reported that representations of Hillman College in *A Different World* (1987–1993) encouraged high school students to include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in their college choice school set. Other studies have found links between television representations and attitudes regarding Greek life, faculty (Tobolowsky, 2001), race (Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2012), and career choice (Chory & Carozza, 2008). Even if parsing out the unique contribution of media to behavior and attitudes is difficult, it remains critical to tease out the

messages conveyed by these media over time, because of their potential influence on American higher education.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK AND ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

The goal of this book is to begin to fill the gap in scholarship on higher education and media. It will provide a more comprehensive analysis of higher education than in the past and explore messages conveyed across media. Cultivation theorists looked primarily at television because of the ubiquitous nature of the medium, constantly playing in the background of our lives (Berger, 1996). However, messages are also conveyed in films, novels, comics, and video games. As Shoemaker and Reese (1991) declared, “The fact that some [messages] are officially labeled ‘entertainment’ does not make them any less potent as cultural forces” (pp. 26–27). Therefore, this book explores these fictional entertainments as rich sites to mine for information about higher education.

The broad range of messages conveyed by media includes notions of the role of women, diversity, faculty and staff, the value of higher education, and the campus at large. It also offers insights into anti-intellectualism, which is the negative association with the academic enterprise. These views exist in society and date back to the founding of the country (Hofstadter, 1963) feeding the public cynicism toward scholarly efforts (Hofstadter, 1963; Rigney, 1991). However, very little research has explored how these views are depicted, if they are, and how they might relate to the portrait of higher education in popular media.

Yet there is evidence that argues that anti-intellectual beliefs have concrete, and often, negative implications in other parts of our lives. For example, they affect whom we elect (Lim, 2008). The war heroes, Andrew Jackson and Dwight Eisenhower, defeated their more intellectual opponents, John Quincy Adams and Adlai Stevenson, respectively largely because they embodied more populist virtues (Lim, 2008). More recently, candidates for the US presidency in 2016 offer overly simplified views that they proudly call anti-establishment but are also anti-intellectual. In fact, President Obama made this comparison explicit adding that “ignorance is not a virtue” (Malloy, 2016) in his condemnation of Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president in 2016. Curiously, Obama’s more deliberate and nuanced approach is criticized as professorial (Talev, 2015). Clearly, these attributes, which are associated with intelligence and scholarship, are openly under siege at present.

Antipathy toward intellectual endeavors is evident outside the political arena as well. This book argues that anti-intellectualism may be at the root of the fictional portrayals of higher education and, in turn, the challenges higher education faces, particularly in recent years, as the public's disdain becomes more vocal. On the campaign trail, Marco Rubio declared that America needs fewer "philosophy majors and more welders" (Rappeport, 2015), adding that welders make more money—thus, reducing the purpose of college to earning top dollar. This perspective not only denigrates a college education but also suggests there is a negative view of vocational training. Therefore, it condemns postsecondary study either way. As a result, students begin to see limited options. Not wanting to pursue avenues that are not valued by others, they may turn their back on certain types of institutions even if they are the best choice for them to meet their goals (Carlson, 2016). The danger is that this decision may have negative, lifelong implications for those students.

Teasing out the purpose of college is complicated as is the public's love-hate view of the endeavor. Still, headlines that focus on graduates who are saddled with debt, unable to find jobs, or move out of the family's home do suggest that college is not fulfilling its promise (Brown, 2016a). The authors in this book argue that many of the negative views regarding higher education have led to the perpetuation of anti-intellectual sentiments. Simply put, if the Marlboro man is considered the American ideal, then, his antithesis, the pale, bespectacled, tweed-jacketed, effete faculty member must be Un-American.

Therefore, this volume offers a comprehensive exploration of the fictional representation of higher education in a range of media, including print, television, film, and video games. Specifically, it will address the following questions: What is the fictional representation of higher education in different media? Has it changed over time? What values and behaviors are associated with institutions of higher education and college life in popular media? What is the overriding purpose of higher education as represented in media? Do the images support anti-intellectualism and, if so, in what way?

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book begins with the more general views of college life and then focuses on the representation of students, staff, and faculty. Each chapter covers its topic over time because cultivation theorists suggest it is the

repeated and consistent images over multiple years that are more likely to become integrated in the audience member's worldview. The chapters also look at the higher education portrait (or specific aspects of the depiction, such as faculty or students) in terms of anti-intellectualism and how this concept continues to find a place in the media representations regardless of the medium or time period.

Specifically, Chapters 2 through 4 offer a more general analysis of higher education as presented in novels, comic books, and video games. All three chapters discuss the portrayal of institutional types in their medium and the collective roles of those involved with higher education. Through a range of media, these depictions illustrate a pervasive, anti-intellectual representation of postsecondary education from novels published as early as 1828 through to contemporary comics and video games.

Therefore, in Chapter 2, Christian Anderson and Katherine Chaddock look at comic novels from 1828 to 2015. As more people have attended college, the portrait expands from a limited (and typically explanatory) view of college life to a broader, more satiric representation of college writ large. In Chapter 3, Jon Lozano offers an insightful investigation of the higher education depiction in video games. Although one might assume these concepts to be at odds, Lozano finds numerous examples of postsecondary education represented in this medium. Then, in Chapter 4, Pauline Reynolds investigates higher education in comic books. Starting with comic books in the late 1930s through 2015, she examines over 150 comics to discuss super and villainous higher education, specifically focusing on the depictions of institutions and the people in them.

The next part of the book focuses on the people who inhabit higher education institutions. It begins with two chapters that explore the experience of students, specifically, the depiction of race and women in popular films. In Chapter 5, Saran Donahoo and Tamara Yakaboski investigate the depiction of racial diversity in films post-Bakke to the present. The authors acknowledge that despite public statements and institutional, state, and federal policies, both Hollywood and higher education reflect, at times, contradictory relationships with representations of racial diversity. This chapter examines how films often present limited, condescending, and anti-intellectual portraits of racially diverse college students.

Yakaboski and Donahoo, in Chapter 6, analyze the depiction of women in 20 films from the 1970s to 2012. Initially represented as victims or aggressors in horror or comedic films, later college women are presented as faux-feminists. However, regardless of the depictions, the women focus

on romance rather than academics, as the camera concentrates on their physical attributes to entice and attract the male gaze.

The next three chapters focus to the role of faculty and staff in media depictions. These individuals, unlike students who filter through and exit every few years, are embedded in college life. They become stand-ins for the institution itself. Thus, these portrayals are closely linked to attitudes about higher education more broadly.

So, in Chapter 7, Michael Stephen Hevel explores the representation of student affairs personnel in 23 novels at the formative time of the field, from 1869 to 1933. He discusses the development of Deans of Women and Men in these early novels and the tug of war between the staid past and the rebellious future in these depictions. In Chapter 8, Pauline Reynolds investigates the portrait of faculty through 63 films from 1930 to 1950. She focuses on the symbol of the book, which is not only synonymous with scholarship but also with faculty, and the purpose of higher education itself. Then, in Chapter 9, I look at the contemporary portrait of faculty in a dozen television series ($n = 93$ episodes) that aired from 1995 to 2014. Directly applying Rigney's typology of anti-intellectualism, the representation of faculty in these series reflects an anti-rational, anti-elite, and unreflective instrumental view of faculty by showing them frequently as petty, cold, critical, unhappy, and thoughtless loners. These investigations culminate in the final chapter by Pauline Reynolds and myself. By revisiting the research questions posed in this chapter, we offer a comprehensive analysis of the findings from all the chapters across media and over time in terms of anti-intellectualism and other topics that emerged.

Thus, the final chapter, specifically, and this book, in general, provide a unique and more complete analysis of the media representation of higher education than in the past. This is significant because the story conveyed by these depictions may have a powerful impact on the public support of higher education as well as a student's educational success. For these reasons, we have one final objective for this book and that is that it galvanizes other scholars to join us in a conversation into the power of popular media on public views of education and all the implications associated with that.

NOTES

1. This seems particularly true for horrendous violence. For example, the murders at Columbine high school and Paducah, Kentucky were initially linked to killers' interest in the films, *The Matrix* (Brook,