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"Movies, TV Shows, and Memes . . . Oh My!": An Honors Education through Popular Culture and Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract: Entertainment media and popular culture often overdramatize the college experience. An honors colloquium engages students in scholarly research and discourse involving thematic elements of academic life in popular culture. An interdisciplinary approach to race, class, the professoriate, Greek life, and foreign experience is espoused. Through a lens of critical social theory, students deconstruct misinformed "stories most often told" to reconstruct more cogent understandings of college life and student experience. With a curriculum designed to advance social justice through equitizing education and amending cultural perceptions, this colloquium helps develop self-motivated, self-regulated, and engaged learners.

Keywords: media literacy; college life films; critical social theory (CST); interdisciplinarity; University of Akron (OH)—Williams Honors College

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Everybody loves a good story, especially one that brings in college life and the crazy experiences students go through to graduate. Higher education has always made its way into popular culture, impressing upon young viewers popularized conceptions of the college experience. Popular culture has become "increasingly the central place where various memories, myths, histories, traditions, and practices circulate" (Gray, 1995, p. 4). According to Shoemaker and Reese (1991), "the fact that some [messages] are officially labeled 'entertainment' does not make them any less potent as cultural forces" (pp. 26–27), and these messages establish the "story most often told" (Dugan, 2017, p. 59) of the real college experience. College expectations and

attitudes evolve among consumers, particularly students thinking about or entering higher education (Tobolowsky, 2001; University of Redlands, 2014, as cited in Reynolds, 2014). Among the many outlooks on the college experience, media ignore the rigor and investment of time, energy, and human capital invested in students' academic work, especially the intellectual work of an honors education (Achterberg, 2005).

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, honors students at the University of Akron enrolled in the fall 2020 colloquium Exploring Higher Education through Popular Culture, facilitated through discussion-based exploration of media portrayals of the college experience and the "story most often told" to potential and currently enrolled college students. In other words, the themes about higher education promoted by accessible and on-demand media became the bases of constructive conversation. Artifacts of popular culture exhibit norms, values, and messages absorbed by viewers that lead to their misconceptions of higher education (Reynolds, 2014). Disruption of this inherently passive acceptance of media portrayals of the college environment and its stakeholders (e.g., students, professors, administrators, alumni, parents) requires a deconstruction of fiction and re-education led by higher education professionals (Reynolds, 2014) and by students who are part of the misconstrued narrative.

TAKING A CRITICAL APPROACH TO INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING

Honors colloquia at the University of Akron are interdisciplinary seminars focused on challenging honors students to participate in stimulating, intellectual traditions outside the students' academic discipline (University of Akron, 2020; Szasz, 2017). An interdisciplinary approach to an honors student's learning affords the opportunity to think critically about conflicting information (Repko et al., 2011) and reconstruct a different meaning of the conveyed message through different disciplinary lenses, thus disrupting the popularized "story most often told." My colloquium included college student identity development, critical social theory, media studies, academic administration and student affairs research, and history (generational studies). These disciplines drove the selection of media with which students interacted as they self-reflected on topics such as race, class, and gender identities (Guy, 2007). As a result, students identified societal structures, inequities in higher education, and the internal and external forces that change attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors toward images of individuals, communities, and organizations.

Echoing the article by Klos et al. (2015), which emphasizes the importance of preparing honors students "to use their vaunted critical-thinking skills to understand the world and its complexities" (p. 54), the learning outcomes of the course focused on (a) analysis and evaluation of representations of higher education in popular culture through a spectrum of media (e.g., songs, TV shows, movies, memes, comics); (b) appraisal of the influence (or lack thereof) of popular culture media on the college experience; and (c) translation of dominant and sociocultural values associated with higher education (as noted in the course syllabus). To challenge and support the course's honors students in the consumer-based and critical perspectives of films, TV shows, and print forms of media, the weekly themes evoked analytical discourse guided by interdisciplinary teaching and the tenets of critical social theory.

Critical social theory (CST) is a multidisciplinary framework that engages students in discourse that "broadens students' horizons of possibility, expands their sense of a larger humanity, and liberates them from the confines of their common sense" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 11). The central tenets of CST described by Dugan (2017, pp. 32–33) are the following:

- truth is inherently biased, whether the individual is aware of it or not, and operates from a set of assumptions about the world;
- structural inequality becomes operationalized by larger social institutions and systems (e.g., culture);
- raising one's consciousness requires challenging taken-for-granted assumptions;
- students need a sense of agency to control their own lives and relinquish oppressive attitudes and behaviors; and
- social change is advanced through reconstructed taken-for-granted assumptions.

Within the central tenets of CST, three topics of concern emerge:

- stocks of knowledge, i.e., assumptions that are present within all members of society and that must be adapted when encountering new information (Schütz & Luckmann, 1989);
- ideology and hegemony, referring to the collective dominant beliefs about social order—and what is good, right, or natural—that promote inequitable social systems (Brookfield, 2005); and

- social location, affecting how individuals make sense of their intersecting social identities, knowledge, and power (Levinson, 2011).

Within the context of mass communication, Storey (2012) has framed six definitions of popular culture, three of which align with the underlying tenets of CST: (a) culture as designed and disseminated by everyday people's likes and experiences; (b) a site to apply Gramsci's political notions of hegemonic negotiation between those with power and those without; and (c) a postmodern perspective that views the world as complex and chaotic while "stress[ing] the importance of questioning anything framed as truth because objectivity and universality are impossibilities" (Dugan, 2017, p. 7). Movies, TV shows, comic books, memes, and other popular media influence how people construct their "common sense" (Gramsci, 1971), perspective, and reality based upon their sensemaking and level of adaptation to fictional or dramatized stories/scenes.

Through a critical pedagogical approach, the CST framework affords honors students the opportunity to surpass the minimum requirement of demonstrating a strong academic focus (Long & Lange, 2002) and to become challenged to "deeply engage ideas and content so that both their analytical abilities and core beliefs and values are transformed" (Folds-Bennett & Twomey, 2013, p. 85).

COURSE CURRICULUM: THEMES AND REALIZATIONS

Popular culture has recently emerged as a pedagogical lens through which adult education occurs in the United States (Morgan et al., 2010; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007a, 2007b). Students can watch and read cultural artifacts and provide an opinion about what they just observed. At the same time, connection to scholarly work that critically evaluates common themes in the college experience deconstructs honors students' stocks of knowledge derived from media. Ultimately, a co-constructive evaluation of course themes to move honors students toward social location displaces the miseducated ideologies and hegemonic beliefs of students, professors, parents, donors, and other common characters of the higher education landscape.

The students enrolled in this course were guided by live discussions, reflective journals, online discussion posts, and focused supplemental readings, adding to the viewing experience of various media. In the introductory discussions to the course, students assumed the identity of scholarly

researchers by developing a research project that aligned with an area of interest in their college experience. To springboard these independent research projects and the media of the course, Reynolds's (2014) "Representing 'U': Popular Culture, Media, and Higher Education" gave students the foundation for understanding that popular culture, higher education, and college student development are three separate though interrelated entities.

Initial Brainstorming about the College Experience

To begin the semester, I sparked conversation about the development and influence of popular culture on society as we also explored the history of colleges and universities and their different institutional types (e.g., community colleges, research universities, Ivy League). For an initial cultural artifact, a movie embodying multiple facets of higher education and college student development reminded students of their high-school-to-college transition as well as current college experiences. The quintessential college film has always been John Landis's (1978) blockbuster *National Lampoon's Animal House*, showcasing Greek life and the overall impression that college social life always trumps academic engagement, putting academic performance on the periphery of college student development; this movie thus focuses heavily on the popularized character stereotypes among university community members, e.g., students and professors (Reynolds, 2014). To better introduce what constitutes the college student environment and experiences, I chose Steve Pink's (2006) film *Accepted* as relevant, relatable, and exploratory, allowing honors students to address and discuss such topics as helicopter parents, admissions requirements, the intricacies of curriculum, and the faculty and facilities needed for accreditation. As part of the course, students' understanding of academic and student affairs shaped the real versus the fictional, translating elements of one film into what they need to know or clarify to engage in a semester-long discussion of relevant topics.

Images and Marketing of the College Experience

The first quarter of the course challenged students to analyze images and marketing of higher education. To best connect with students' repertoire of previously viewed media, we discussed the initial images of two TV series pilot episodes: *Community* (Foster et al., 2009–2015) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (Rhimes et al., 2014–2020) The overdramatized journey in *Community* presents a small community of nontraditional misfits trying to

navigate college socialization; its focus on romance between and outside of a close-knit group of friends and on the easiness of a community college education frames students' misconceptions of community colleges. *How to Get Away with Murder* places the same elements in the context of a law school education, presenting professional and personal tribulations along with covering up the murder of the students' law professor. Both TV series introduce common stigmas associated with community college and professional education, portraying the former as lackadaisical and the latter as demanding. These two series, as well as clips of admissions-based movies, parodies, and real-life professional interviews, afforded students the opportunity to identify, interpret, and re-educate themselves and others about several dichotomies, e.g., community college versus Ivy League in terms of academic rigor and demographics; hard-working versus legacy admissions in terms of high school academic performance, test scores, and family finances; and hands-off versus hands-on administrators in the college student socialization process.

Within the realm of higher education marketing, students assumed the identity of a consumer in relation to the University of Akron and other institutional types, examining mistrust, promises, values, and student images. According to Proctor et al. (2002), "People often try to make sense of their lives by seeing themselves as the characters in a story interacting with different environmental events" (p. 32). Part of this module concerned analyses of TV and online commercials (Litten & Brodigan, 1982) of various institutions, including a decade of TV advertisements for the University of Akron, other four-year institutions, community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), women's colleges, tribal colleges, and for-profit universities. One student observed that, among these institutional types, Ivy League schools do not need commercials to gain enrollment thanks to their heritage, reputation, and legacies. However, for-profit institutions are motivated by the need to generate marginal revenue (Beaver, 2017) and are driven by strategic marketing plans centered on "future opportunities" (Joyce et al., 2017, p. 327). Students noted that for-profit university commercials, like the University of Phoenix's (2016) *More Than Brains* commercial and the *Saturday Night Live* (SNL, 2013) skit *University of Westfield Online*, target non-traditional students who are underrepresented; diverse in race; full-time workers; adult learners (twenty-five years old or higher); single mothers; downsized workers; and veterans (Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment [CAPSEE], 2018; Cottom, 2017; Hodgman, 2018). Students quickly connected higher education marketing and the consumer's

gaze to tuition affordability, accessibility, and institutional mission among for-profit universities versus all other institutional types of colleges or universities. In brief presentations on the differences and similarities between institutions (e.g., Fond du Lac Tribal & Community College and Western Governors University; Lake Area Technical Institute and Walsh University; College of Saint Mary and Gateway Community College), students proposed ways to equitize or universalize access to institutions that provide a return on investment and/or workforce training.

Portrayal of Professors

Reynolds's (2014) "Representing 'U': Popular Culture, Media, and Higher Education" excited my students with her critical approach to categorizing professors in popular culture through nonacademic, academic, and student gazes (e.g., "The Loner," "The Bookworm," "The Villain," and "The Lecherous"). Additionally, Reynolds (2014) explored the evolving perception of White, straight, male professors through alternative media narratives of professors of Color, of the LGBTQ+ spectrum, and of women. An initial worthwhile activity in the class was criticism of "cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon" (Shifman, 2013, pp. 364–65). Students analyzed professor memes, derived from a simple Google Images search, that communicated a predominant representation of White, older men and of common struggles students face in their learning. The use of memes related to Generation Z honors students have created, connected with, or scrolled past memes on various social media platforms (Mendez-Reguera & Lopez Cabrera, 2020). For instance, in the *Saturday Night Live* (2017) skit with the infamous, heartbreaking slacker Chad and a teaching assistant (played by Benedict Cumberbatch), first impressions lead the viewer to think the professor is making an intimate gesture to a student. This adventure into the periphery of an LGBTQ+ instructor's life and professional struggles established a platform on which students could develop advice on the steps to take when normalized sexual harassment occurs.

Following these activities, a combination of comic strips and virtual movie-going exposed some comedic, raw, and provocative portrayals of White, straight, male professors in media. The comic strip *Piled Higher Deeper (PhD)* satirizes the master-like power of professors over graduate students (Kelly, 2009). The students next focused their critical analysis on Wayne Roberts's (2018) *The Professor*, featuring a literature teacher diagnosed with terminal cancer who embodies common stereotypes of professors: a

tweed-wearing, pseudo-rock male, embroiled in marital squabbles, with trash attitudes toward proper teaching etiquette, and fraternizing with students for sex and drugs. Colloquium students quickly dissected the film in terms of previous scholarly and media content of the semester, seeing it as a product of the student gaze romanticizing and villainizing professors, overlooking their vices and victories.

The College Student Experience

Shifting the focus from teaching to learning, we began a deeper analysis—through song, comics, and skits—of student typologies such as "The Activist," "The Greek," "The Pathless," and "The Braniac." Kanye West's (2004) album *The College Dropout* is an approach in rap to his personal struggles, including portrayal of his college experience in "School Spirit" through a gangster persona. Students interpreted the multiple images Kanye created of stigmas related to Greek life as well as student retention and career aspirations. Most of the students had never heard this song before, but discussion of the message consumers received from Kanye's lyrics reiterated former themes about student and parent expectations of college life. To counter these images, the College Humor (2018) skit *If College Movies Were Honest* comedically addressed similar issues by showcasing the importance of studying, student responsibility, and romantic relationships. Students then engaged in discussions about student development and conduct as portrayed in TV and YouTube parodies of college residents and resident assistants (RAs). Lastly, we gravitated toward a variety of comic strips like Hodge's (2014) *Candi* comics about college roommates transitioning into and through adulthood and college. This week served as a time for honors students to (dis)associate their own experiences thus far in higher education to audio-visual media. During virtual and in-class discussions, students deconstructed what they witnessed in the media and reframed student struggles with suggested remedies to academic, social, mental, and emotional development.

College Athletics

A common storyline in popular culture today is the presence and influence of college sports. Sociocultural movements and events in American history such as the Great Depression and World War II have driven the production of college athletic films. Football is the sport most often portrayed, exhibiting the physical fitness and prowess of its players and a sense of building a

large community of diverse, multigendered fans, but at the same time college student-athletes have become the butt of jokes about the intellectual limits of players working toward the "American Athletic Dream" (Miller, 2010). In tandem with Miller's historical analysis of cinematic college football, honors students connected history and contemporary stigmas of college student-athletes to Coraci's (1998) fictional football film *The Waterboy* and the American documentary Netflix series *Last Chance U* (Labracio et al., 2016–2020). In discussing Miller's (2010) article, students elaborated on interventions by coaches, advisors, and faculty to work with rather than against the academic performance of college student-athletes.

Last Chance U portrays elite athletes with difficult pasts who resort to community colleges as part of the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) while trying to return to universities supported by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and become professional football players. Having taught over the last five years with at least one college student-athlete each semester, I was able to bring some feedback and insight on what faculty and athletic departments provide to their students to ensure high performance on and off the field, including tutoring, career advising, and academic clustering practices. I posed the question, "Why do you think students can major in individual instruments but cannot do so for individual sports?" An excellent discussion took place about curricular versus co-curricular development and what constitutes a varsity sport. With a new age of video games, eSports have become a scholarship-worthy venue for student-athletes, and other competitive areas became part of the conversation, particularly forensics, as varsity-like sport, as represented in Kavana Dornbusch's (2006) film *Love & Debate*.

Greek Life, Gender, and Sexuality

Of all the college experiences displayed in popular media, Greek life—now referred to by higher education professionals as Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL)—is most commonly linked to parties, sex, drugs, poor academic performance, and initiation rituals. I remember a risk-management presentation I led for fraternity and sorority members at the University of Akron in 2019 on how to overcome the Greek stigma in job applications and interviews. With this presentation in mind, I centered this part of the course on a documentary about secret societies in fraternities and sororities, elaborating on the recruitment process, behind-the-scenes rituals, and values of society members. Honors students found relationships between this highly

detailed inside look at FSL and three cultural media artifacts: "Fraternity" from the Indie band Foo Fighters' (1999) album *There is Nothing Left to Lose*; Stoller's (2014) fraternity film *Neighbors*, featuring Zac Efron and Seth Rogen; and the satirical slasher series *Scream Queens* by Brennan et al. (2015–2016). Students identified complete and partial truths in the Foo Fighters song, which then led into a content analysis of *Neighbors*. Supplemented by Franich's (2014) article "How to Make the Ultimate Greek Movie," students approached the setting, characters, and conveyed college experience through a critical lens, deconstructing major stereotypes, relationships, and levels of power and influence in the film, identifying consumers' perception of anti-intellectualism, the need to perform well academically, career aspirations, and hypertoxic masculinity (Reynolds, 2014). *Scream Queens* allowed students a contemporary look into common consumer views of sororities as exclusive, predominately White, privileged, and academically successful. The TV series attempts to disrupt these stereotypes by promoting the inclusive recruitment of women who are part of the LGBTQ+, Black, disabled, and "unpopular" communities. During the discussion, students realized that non-homogeneous populations were tokenized, particularly the characters of color who, as one student remarked, are now eligible to play as a "final girl" at the end of a slasher/horror storyline.

Gender and sexuality continue to go hand in hand with popular culture perceptions of higher education—for instance, *Legally Blonde* (2001) or *The House Bunny* (2008)—ranging from male and female identity development, rape culture, insider/outsider positionality, and transgressions of societal norms. Wolodarsky's (2002) film *Sorority Boys* tells a story of three fraternity boys who disguise themselves as women after having been kicked out of their fraternity due to a false claim that they stole their fraternity's money. Throughout the film, my honors students critiqued how the male characters' chauvinistic ways had changed after experiencing the objectification and sexualization of their undercover personalities. Other themes emerged such as lesbian identity development, feminist professors, and the shift from hegemonic, hypermasculinity to alternative masculinities.

Continuing with gender roles and societal expectations, Newell's (2003) 1950s-based film *Mona Lisa Smile* about an all-women's school (Wellesley College) educated my students on the history of single-sex education. This film was produced in the twenty-first century but focused on the role and social standing of women after World War II (Gogberashvili, 2014). Through a critical feminist lens, students discussed whether the values and

social norms about the role, rights, and power of educated women were the same nearly seventy years later. Lastly, a clip from *The Simpsons* (Brooks et al., 1989–present) attempts to portray sensitive and politically correct students at Yale University, where the devious and wealthy proprietor of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant wishes to endow a Department of Nuclear Plant Management at his alma mater. The clip demonstrates a generational difference in social values and in our cultural understanding of the evolution of gender and sexual identity in the context of cisgender normativity and microaggressions. Students deconstructed the scene by imagining inclusive student-administration cooperation that welcomes and neither trivializes nor offends community members.

Race and Class

Inequities in education, sense of belonging, and opportunity persist among marginalized student populations. In terms of race, students became educated on the history, mission, and community of HBCUs through Parrott-Sheffer's (2008) chapter titled "Not a Laughing Matter: The Portrayals of Black Colleges on Television." In concert with this informational reading, students connected Black student identity development and HBCU values to a short investigative story about being a White student at an HBCU as well as the comedy-drama Netflix series *Dear White People* (Simien et al., 2017–present), placed at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Honors students identified elements of Black community, traditions, and values of the campus communities in both contexts, identifying student and academic affairs interventions suitable to train and advocate for overcoming implicit bias, rejecting microaggressive behaviors, and integrating a pluralistic education for all student learning. These recommendations paralleled the themes students identified on the topic of social class, based on a character analysis of first-generation, low-socioeconomic, brilliant college-goer Lip Gallagher from *Shameless* (Wells et al., 2011–present). Through a recently published book chapter by Liz Piatt and N. J. Akbar (2020), students recognized campus services such as Student Support Services (SSS), Upward Bound (UB), and the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program (a.k.a. McNair Scholars Program) that assist students who historically may not persist to graduation. During our conversation about social class, college student mental health and the concept of the imposter syndrome emerged as two relevant and essential topics of discussion.

International Higher Education

During the nineteenth century, American colleges and universities began to be influenced by ideas emanating from German higher education, primarily relating to the faculty responsibilities of research and teaching (Boyer, 1990). The fact that countries adapt their educational policies from other nations leads to the question of what similarities and differences exist between curricula, graduation planning, career development, accreditation (quality assurance), and college life. For this part of our course, honors students gave presentations on an assigned country, researching the structure and expectations of its higher education. The students approached their presentation through a comparative lens, suggesting what does and does not work well in that country compared to the United States. European and Oceanic countries held the most appeal to students for ease of degree completion and a rich, adventurous cultural experience. Other continents were praised for their higher education system structures and academic rigor. Overall, students found this research and short presentation useful in realizing that there is always room for enhancements in American higher education that promise easier credit transfers, intercultural competencies, and a practical education.

To open students to a new foreign film, we explored first-year medical students in France in the French film *Première Année* (Lilti, 2018), or *The Freshmen* in English. With my background and professional experience in French language and culture, specifically French higher education, I was able to explain the overarching values of a French education and preparation for a medical specialty by completing the highly competitive *concours* to become a doctor, pharmacist, midwife, or dentist. My dissertation research draws from medical student specialty choice, which prepared my students to better understand what it means for a medical student to determine their professional track. Although students had to "read the movie" with subtitles, a critical analysis of educational policy (e.g., ranking by objective testing) and career guidance to French youth on becoming a professional in France led to an analysis of federal funding, graduate education admissions requirements, and university services focused on preparing students as paraprofessionals before formally entering their graduate or professional programs.

Individual Research Projects

For the Exploring Higher Education through Popular Culture honors colloquium, students were tasked with determining a research topic of interest that they would conduct over the semester and with creating a formal

research paper (4–6 pages) and live presentation (8–10 minutes). Students reviewed and analyzed cultural artifacts and scholarly research to address a research question they created toward the beginning of the semester. Through guided conversations in class and through online discussion boards, students shared their research over a variety of topics, such as the following:

- the portrayal of mental health among college students;
- the isolation of students in higher education;
- the underrepresentation of sorority girls and their survival;
- the representation of anti-intellectualism in higher education;
- the portrayal of mathematicians in popular culture;
- an analysis of science education in film; and
- the effects of parental pressure on students as shown in the media.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Honors programs aim to challenge students "to become self-motivated, self-regulating engaged thinkers" (Edman, 2002, p. 103) in a pluralistic society. Our honors students will continue to move on and up with knowledge, power, and influence that affects the development of their family, peers, and society. In my course, I prepared students to approach their work and interactions with people, media, and ideas by challenging them to rewrite the "story most often told" and to properly set the stage for themselves and others to advance social change. Through an interdisciplinary approach, ongoing reflection and critical analysis of higher education as presented in popular culture challenged my honors students to disrupt popularized miseducation and supply a reeducating alternative. A self-assigned research topic on a common issue relevant to the student is a small start to discovering a return on investment in research and life-career planning. As I continue to teach this course, I will, like my students, adapt to their interests, to current events, and to contemporary media so we may all learn together about how to optimize our time and experiences in college life.

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