LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Students Won't Respect Teachers if Teachers Don't Respect Students

To the Editor:

I'm not sure what Miriam Kalman Harris means by "smarter," but her central goals as a teacher are ones I recognize: We would all like our students to respect learning and to master the curriculum ("We Are Smarter Than Our Students," The Review, October 11). Perhaps lecturing on the definition of terms is one method for achieving those goals, but plowing ahead with a lesson despite a student's questions (as irrelevant as they may appear to be) is not likely to produce in students either respect or mastery.

In Ms. Harris's class, a student asked why the same short story appeared in two different books, a question that reveals a lack of familiarity with how literature is anthologized. If students are so ill acquainted with something we teachers find obvious, how likely are they to master or even care about the elements of fiction -- or, for that matter, to have much respect for the person who is listing the elements on the board? ...

Perhaps Ms. Harris could have digressed slightly from the lesson to talk about copyright law, anthologies, the qualities of stories that make it into anthologies, the way great stories integrate plot, setting, irony, and so on -- and she'd be back with the lesson.

I've had time to think about the question Ms. Harris was asked; she felt ambushed. But it seems that the asking should have alerted her to the futility of sowing seeds on concrete. Unfortunately, it only encouraged her to throw them with greater force.

James M. Wallace
Associate Professor of English
King's College
Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

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To the Editor:

As I was returning home from teaching an 8 p.m. class on police organizational structure, Miriam Harris's essay caught my eye during one of the numerous red lights I have to endure on the congested northeastern roadways. That evening, I had had to cut class short due to the sea of dulled eyes and constant irrelevant questions about the midterm format. Even though we had covered only a third of the lecture, the
classroom emptied out entirely too quickly given the approaching mid-term.

Sure, we all went home early that evening, but the broader goal of education had lost a round. ...

I have seen too few concerned educators raise all of Ms. Harris's relevant points. ... When I failed to pick up an assignment on the day it was due, there was a minor uproar in the class. When I tried to explain to the students that the assignment was for them, and the reward was in its accomplishment and not in my grading it, their lack of comprehension made me realize that they were alienated from this process we call education.

Dumbing down classes and lowering standards can never be an option. As Ms. Harris correctly states, students should come first, and no benefit is afforded them through those techniques. ... As she says, with meticulous feedback and a renewed emphasis on the value of the teacher and a constant reminder of the goals of higher education, perhaps college students will once again become individuals who in their later years can look back in admiration and remember those who were once smarter than they were.

Emmanuel Barthe
Assistant Professor of Public Administration
Kean University
Union, N.J.

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To the Editor:

Miriam Harris seems to be yet another proud Ph.D. who, through no fault of her own, has been displaced from the world of the intellectual elite and forced to labor in the muck of the community college. She recites the familiar, tiresome litany of whines about today's college students. She claims to be smart, but it seems she doesn't know where she is or whom she's dealing with -- if she did, she would adjust not her standards but her teaching methods, so she could have some hope of engaging the students in her course. ...

Ms. Harris says that we need to make students understand they have to follow directions; we have to teach them to respect others; we have to teach them to respect perfectionism and value discipline -- again, an old chant that never gets around to saying exactly how we can do these things. And it's hard to take her vague platitudes seriously when she obviously is not teaching her students these things and shows no desire to do anything innovative in her classroom that might help students begin to take an interest in learning the subject. It seems clear that what Dr. Harris really wants to teach students is to be just like her. To be fair, that is what a lot of teachers want.

I'll suggest a starting point for Dr. Harris's revolution: herself.
She should learn who her students are, respect them as individuals, treat them like they are smart and worthy of her attention, and join their world -- which is, after all, a vital part of her world.

Dan Glynn
Instructor of English
Highland Community College
Highland, Kan.

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To the Editor:

I have to make a couple of comments about Miriam Harris's essay.

First, if a Nobel laureate in chemistry decides to take Ms. Harris's literature class when he retires from teaching chemistry, which of them is smarter?

Second, Ms. Harris sounds like a baby boomer who regrets all the dismantling of authority and the "don't trust anyone over 30" that went on in the '60s, now that she is over 30 and in a position of authority. How quaint.

Stephen Good
Associate Librarian
Law School Library
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Tex.

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To the Editor:

Miriam Harris is to be commended for being so completely candid about her experiences with teaching students, with whom she has had substantial difficulty. It is rare that an academic of such obvious capability would be so forthcoming regarding her ambivalence about teaching.

We have all struggled with earning students' respect. ... Dr. Harris's response to this difficulty has been to retreat to the posture of someone who is smarter than her students and who, therefore, need not spend her time acknowledging their concerns unless they are within the specific parameters of her classroom plan.

Given her commendable candor, I will show her the courtesy of returning it in kind. Students will not respect a faculty member who does not seek to earn respect on a regular basis.

As both an administrator and a faculty member of a large medical school, I have seen many faculty members make the same mistake Dr. Harris makes: She, and they, have missed an important teaching opportunity by choosing to protect professional stature when feeling threatened. ... When respect
is offered to students and demanded in return, they will respond in kind. When it is not, they will ask the kind of question Dr. Harris was asked: "When we asked a question, you wouldn't even answer it. Why not?" Questions, even the annoying or out-of-place ones, deserve a response as an important aspect of teaching.

If there is a lack of decorum in our schools and society at large, it is up to us to intervene as we can to change that for the better, not to respond out of defensiveness. Yes, we are smarter than our students -- and we need to act like it.

Richard L. Holloway  
Associate Dean for Student Affairs  
Professor of Family and Community Medicine  
Medical College of Wisconsin  
Milwaukee

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To the Editor:

Miriam Harris understands the situation in her classes and at her institution perfectly, but she doesn't want to face the facts that the situation with her students will stay the same -- or, more probably, get worse -- until the authorities of her county and the administrators of her college let all students and future applicants know that students are not entitled to a degree or diploma in return for showing up, but will have to earn their grades and degrees.

Until that happens, the county will be wasting its money and failing the students it admits and lets continue through the system.

If Dr. Harris wants to enjoy her life and feel she is teaching -- not serving as a timekeeper for the hours students spend in class, whether they learn or not -- she should find a job at a college that has standards and enforces them.

Maynard Merel  
Belle Harbor, N.Y.

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