What do our students want from us? I asked my provost this question a while ago. He thought I had raised the question rhetorically, or worse, cynically, and expected next a list of complaints about all the demands my students had been making of me, followed by a request for more compensation and release time, and the usual litany of discontents. But my question was asked without any accompanying agenda. In fact, it was not at all a question about us, but about students. I went on spontaneously with a few nostalgic portraits of professors I had had in the late 1960s at a small liberal arts college where I did my undergraduate work.

My French professor had known the writer and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry during World War II. He had read everything, it seemed, quoting Camus and Gide, Faulkner, Joyce, Pascal, Dostoevsky. On occasion, when a class was going nowhere, he would end it sotto voce with a smiling “Go away.” When my roommate and I decided to interview him about the French Resistance for the college newspaper, he agreed and invited us to his home, where he poured out a glass of white wine for each of us, prepared a ragout de lapin, and went on for a few hours about Malraux and Sartre, and the mysterious disappearance of Saint-Exupéry. I later learned that our interviewee had designed and built most of his house, a Mediterranean stucco bungalow in the middle of Amish country.

My German professor brought his arthritic Weimaraner to class. As a boy, he

Smart Classrooms Cannot Replace Remarkable Professors

by Miles Groth

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was in a Prussian military, had corresponded with Thomas Mann, and in class discussion returned again and again to *Death in Venice*. When his emphysema worsened and he could no longer walk to class, he retired in the care of a young man and died at home. Twenty years after I graduated, I retraced the novel’s main character Gustav von Aschenbach’s passage from Munich, via Pola, to the Lido in Venice. At Ljubljana, I learned that it was too early in the season for the ferry across the Adriatic to the Serenissima, so I retraced my steps via Trieste and on to the private beach across from the Hotel des Bains.

As it happens, neither of the professors I talked about is remembered as an “important” scholar, although at my alma mater a travel grant in the name of one of them is now offered to young worthies. Their influence was wider, however, than that of many authors of scholarly monographs.

I had many more stories to tell my provost, but as usual he was in a hurry and, in any case, I already knew the answer to my question for him: “Nothing.”

“I am, as Kenneth Clark confessed in the concluding paragraph of *Civilisation*, “a stick in the mud.” Clark’s self-reference is a preface to his simple, magisterial credo. I quote him to be in good company about my old-fashioned belief that in a time of constructing “smart classrooms” and globalizing curricula, what students want most is us, individual faculty members with our unique set of experiences and both a venue and willingness to share them with younger people. Before going further to suggest why the loss of this desire among students is so ominous, let me add a few more stories about professors who drew me to them as people.

There was the English teacher, a poet, who read extended sections of “Song of Myself,” short poems by a then relatively unknown Chilean poet, César Vallejo, whom he was then translating. One day, while reading something by Kenneth Patchen, he began to sob. He stopped; we took a break. The class was stunned. A man crying about words! We came back to campus the next fall to find that he had not been renewed because of his political views on the Vietnam War.

Two others in the English department continued to perform during summers at a well-known summer Shakespeare festival where they had met as student interns. They took turns directing productions in our small theatre—Shakespeare, Brecht, Ibsen. One was an outstanding Sir Toby Belch, the other had an exorbitant laugh for moments of subtle humor that others missed. From the latter, we learned what was witty; from the former, the broad humor that audiences respond...
to. He and his wife also offered students refuge from the exceptional experiences of those heady years. A guest room at their home was always available on short notice to a disconnected undergraduate who would call up or wander by some lonely weekend afternoon. Finally, there was the English Romanticism specialist who read Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley with such passion and music that after a class at his home, where his wife would brew tea and serve Lorna Doones, a few of us would wander the area behind campus for an hour or two talking about hopeless love. The poet the college fired became the most published and best known of the professors I had as an undergraduate. The Romanticist eventually could no longer tolerate the corporate shape academe was taking and retired with his wife to raise fir trees in the Pacific Northwest. And last of all there was the routine of my chemistry professor who had been at Dupont Industries on the laboratory team that first synthesized nylon. She had retired from “work” to the pleasure of teaching. Each morning at 8:00 before she began a lecture on inorganic chemistry, she would take a first stance, hoist her skirt an inch or two to its proper position, and launch on a talk about free radicals. I spent hours in her office trying to understand how to balance a simple equation. Her patience was endless but the mystery forever eluded me.

These miniature characterizations are simply about what students—most students—wanted then. My provost might say that times have changed, but after nearly 30 years of undergraduate teaching, I am sure that what students still want most of all is us. They want the memorable personalities as much as the content. I recall the cracked lens in my French professor’s reading glasses that in the four years I knew him was never repaired, the sandals he wore year-round in late summer and through the snowy days of the spring semester, the ragout and wine he provided two hapless sophomores. Students still want to take us, not courses, although this is becoming increasingly difficult to manage. Internet sites are not an adequate substitute for the stories of Germany between the wars or my German professor’s winking left eye.

But things are changing. More and more, students do not want us; instead, they need us. They need an A. They need a letter of recommendation. They need to get into a certain class that is already closed. But I think the change demands our close attention. Professors have become degree brokers between the institutions that employ us and our students, their parents, and the other sources of
tuition and housing dollars that support the colleges and universities that pay our salaries.

To need something is to feel a lack which that something can fill. To want someone is to desire to add something of the person to who we are. It is therefore not surprising that student’s needs are increasingly being met by “smart classrooms” and other technologies. These instrumentalities fill needs, but they do not compel students to want something more personal in their lives. This is what the professors I have described had to offer. To be sure, the offer is still good on some campuses and such people can still be found here and there leading a seminar or giving a lecture. On the other hand, my impression is that the offer is being withdrawn at more and more institutions of higher learning.

Each of the people I described was one of a kind, irreplaceable. I dropped the English course that the fired poet was to have taught. My German professor had his thumb-worn copies of Rilke, George, and Hölderlin, but it was the way he had about him that was most compelling. The French professor brought along his copy of Picon’s *Panorama de la Litterature Française*, whose pages he had opened with a knife. There was no overhead projector or DVD player in his classroom. His idiosyncratic presence dominated the room. More than anything else, he was there and that is what we wanted from his class.

Far from wanting us or what amounts to the same thing, wanting something from us, our students (with important exceptions, of course) are eager to be done with us and anxious to leave us. For most, being graduated from college is like being discharged from the hospital or released from prison, not being born in a certain sense, as university commencement exercises originally symbolized. For
many students, commencement is not the beginning of an enriched life but the 
welcomed relief of leaving behind an arduous period of stress that followed 12 
years of what more and more appears to be government subsidized, institutional-
ized adolescent day care. I will leave it to others to explain why this is so (keeping 
the young out of the job market a few years longer? equal opportunity for higher 
education? the real democratization of education?), but I encourage my colleagues 
to consider that the change I have described has nothing to do with the effective 
stewardship of limited resources in higher education, nor the important cultural 
issues of inclusiveness and globalization. It is simply that students no longer want

In my opinion, things have changed not so much because the electronic media 
are more engaging and their “hot” talking heads are more colorful and com-
pelling by comparison to our talking professorial bodies. Videos, PowerPoint dis-
plays and in-class exploration of Web sites are wonderful sources of the presenta-
tion and illustration of ideas, but they cannot substitute for the presence of the 
personalities I fondly recall. Clearly, students need everything that is being made 
more handily available to them online in databases and via boolean searches. All 
this can make their readings more accessible, but it cannot make what they read 
more meaningful and memorable. Only personality, the surprising impromptu 
comment, or some serendipitous confluence of a stewed rabbit, stucco, a broken 
eyeglass lens, and some lines from *Le Petit Prince* can do that.

Many (including my mother) told me that one cannot want what one has 
ever known. This is probably one reason our students do not want us and, what 
amounts to the same thing, do not want anything from us. They need that “A” from 
us but they do not want our presence. They need a B.A. to qualify for a job inter-
view but they do not want to be unbalanced by the quirky perspective our wide 
reading and experience challenge them with. Unlike Web sites and DVDs, profes-
sors have lived, traveled, and read a lot. We have learned how students learn and 
when not to say something. Unlike a videotape, we know when to stop. A 
PowerPoint presentation cannot sense when not to move on to the next point. 
Because a film is speaking to everyone in the room there is the chance it may not 
be speaking to anyone.

Students feel they want something, but they don’t know what it is. They sense

Students do not want to be unbalanced by the quirky perspective our wide reading and experience challenge them with.
what that is in pop stars, actors, and athletes. But these figures are distant, managed, touched-up, and unreal. They are not occurring now. Nor will even a video of a Kenneth Clark, a Jacob Bronowski, a Joseph Campbell, or a Carl Rogers ever match the unexpected flash of recognition or insight in a classroom or around a seminar table that happens when a living, talking professor meets an engaged student who wants what the older, usually better-informed, and generally more experienced person wants to give.

I should add that I knew nothing of the personal lives of the professors I’ve recalled. In a few cases my fondness for them was filial, but we were never friends.

We can never become our students’ friend. None of us could handle that many friends. Besides, that is something they do not want from us.

I now realize in retrospect and after having taught many students that this is perhaps the most important reason why teaching is one of what Freud called the three “impossible professions” (the other two being healing and leading). We can never become our students’ friend. None of us could handle that many friends. Besides, that is something they do not want from us. Like parents, we must sooner or later send them packing or we have not been good mentors. In our efforts to preclude the abuses of professorial leverage and power that will always exist in the academic environment, we may have eliminated what our students feel they most want: the odd personal habit, turn of phrase, or off-hand comment that a professor’s most sensitive instrument, his or her personality, provides a student. And, yes, some of my professors were hungover many mornings and others were nasty or just plain incompetent.

But, institutional politics aside, I can forgive the institution for its lapses in these cases because it allowed us the unforgettable moments of, for example, the tenured language teacher who lectured standing on his desk, the earnest kindnesses of the Kierkegaard scholar with his Sartrean errant left eye, the sight of the Sanskrit scholar reading under a magnifying light in his office at 2 a.m. as I walked through campus wondering how I would grow up, or the historian who more than once lapsed into silence mid-sentence, mid-class, trying to illuminate the intention of a passage from Hegel’s *Logic* and walked out of the room without dismissing class.

There is something missing in the lives of many college and university faculty members. It is something we once had in this calling but now lack: it’s being wanted by our students. If this “being wanted” is beginning to evoke the image of a poster issued by a law enforcement agency, the image is not at all inappropriate.
The best of my professors were intellectual gangsters with unconventional views. In another sense, we should be on the most-wanted list of adults for our students. They may want the beauty of a small-college campus or the high-velocity ambience of an urban university. The first setting helps some of them relax. The other environment provides that splash of cold water that can disturb the more or less fixed perspective of a provincial childhood and early adolescence. Students should also want the ready availability of online sources of information. This will expedite their search for what to read and, like browsing library stacks, can bring into view unexpected references. But they should also want us. They should want something of our personality, our way of talking, formulating a question, or teasing out a response. They should want our intellectual vigilance and our being models of curiosity, investigation and creative thinking. These are communicated directly, person to person.

How can you (a student) want something from someone (a professor) who needs something from you; namely, a high mark on the student’s evaluation?

It is certainly important that we no longer smoke tobacco, but students are missing the breaks between classes (just long enough to finish a cigarette) when a professor and student used to talk. The last puff indicated that time was up for the brief, private conversation. I also recall that while they were not chained to their desks, faculty somehow seemed to be “around” more than we are now, and more available to students. As faculty we are now expected to be available to the institution more hours during a semester than ever before. While service to the institution is one condition for being granted tenure at most universities, where in our handbooks is anything said about giving students what they want versus what they need.

Perhaps student evaluations of teaching have precluded this, for how can you (a student) want something from someone (a professor) who needs something from you; namely, a high mark on the student’s evaluation? It seems that the roles have been reversed and we now want something from our students. How odd.