

The Narcissism Epidemic On Campus



BY W. KEITH CAMPBELL AND JEAN M. TWENGE

Students do not enter higher education institutions as blank slates. Instead, they arrive on college and university campuses shaped by 12 to 14 years of formal education, mass quantities of traditional and non-traditional media, and extensive exposure to technology, particularly social networking sites. In recent years, a major cultural shift has occurred in the broader culture and is mirrored on campuses nationwide: The “narcissism epidemic” involves increases in both individual narcissism and cultural narcissism, and it is changing how students perceive their academic experiences.

In a recent study, Ellen Greenberger, a research professor at the University of California, Irvine, found that two-thirds of college students surveyed believe that they should receive a higher course grade simply by explaining to their instructors that they are trying. Clearly, the prevalence of this type of thinking places increasing pressure on faculty and administrators, including senior student affairs officers (SSAOs), to temper unrealistic expectations and provide practical guidance to students.

What is Narcissism?

While the term is used frequently, a good deal of confusion exists about the definition of narcissism. Narcissism can be defined as a personality trait, the level of which can be charted as a bell-shaped curve. Most individuals exhibit moderate levels of narcissism and would be charted at the center of the curve with fewer individuals at the high or low extremes. Those at the higher end of the curve hold a very positive or narcissistic view of themselves: They believe that they are special, unique, important, and physically attractive. They also report less interest in warm, empathetic, or caring relationships with others. Narcissistic individuals are quite good

at starting relationships and are often judged as likable, charming, or charismatic, but they generally are not interested in the commitments that make relationships work. To maintain their positive image, narcissistic individuals engage in a range of self-enhancing behaviors, including: taking credit for success and blaming others for failure; trying to associate with popular peers; name-dropping; buying fancy cars or clothing; jumping at chances for attention or status; and demonstrating hyper-competitiveness.

At the extremes, narcissism can manifest as a clinical or psychiatric disorder. Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a long-term pattern of narcissistic behavior as evidenced by lack of empathy, need for admiration, and a grandiose view of oneself. An individual's narcissism must cause clinically significant problems, including relationship troubles, conflicts at work, or distortions in thinking, to qualify as NPD.

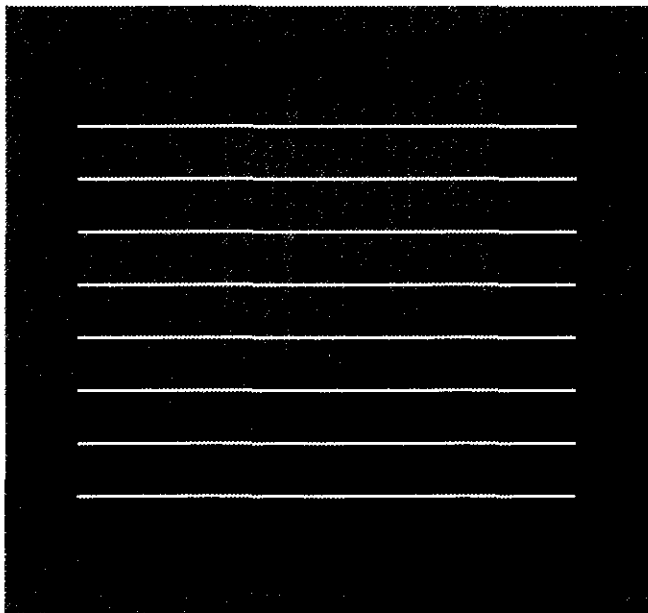
Finally, narcissism can be a cultural condition, which we have witnessed in the United States over the last three decades. The traits or characteristics associated with individual narcissism have become commonplace in many aspects of American culture: Plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures are booming in popularity, even among the young; materialism

is on the rise; celebrity and fame have become increasingly popular goals for young people; and even song lyrics are more self-focused.

Narcissism, in all its forms, is particularly relevant to campus life. Trait narcissism is increasing in young people; increases in NPD have been cited by practitioners; and college and university culture has become more narcissistic in many of the same ways as the broader culture.

The Rise in Narcissism on Campus

How do we know narcissism is increasing on campuses? In compiling data from previous studies, the authors reviewed average narcissism scores from samples of college students. Those scores have risen slightly more than a third of a standard deviation over the last 25 years, which is considered a moderate change. However, this moderate average change leads to large changes at the extremes. For example, 30 percent of college students now agree with the majority of questions on a narcissism inventory, compared to 19 percent in the early 1980s. Research on NPD—the extreme form of narcissism—shows a similar pattern. A recent National Institutes of Health study assessed the lifetime rates of NPD in a sample of more than 34,000 Americans. The lifetime rates of narcissism were very high in young people—approximately 1 in 11 people in their 20s had experienced full-blown NPD symptoms, in stark contrast to 1 in 30 individuals in their 60s, who report NPD symptoms.



The overall picture is that today's average college students are somewhat more narcissistic than previous generations of students, and the number of highly narcissistic students is much higher. Highly narcissistic students require the most attention from faculty and staff. Narcissistic students are more likely to demand special treatment, cheat, have conflicts with others, drink, gamble, and engage in short-term sexual relationships. At the extremes, the perpetrators of violent crimes on campus, such as school shootings and sexual assaults, are also much more likely to be narcissists. In *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (Free Press, 2009),

four major contributors to this growing trend are cited: changes in parenting and childhood education with greater permissiveness and self-esteem; shifts in the media toward fame; the rise of social networking; and the availability of easy credit.

Narcissism is often linked to a sense of entitlement. Greenberger's recent research found very high levels of student entitlement, including the following:

- Forty-one percent of students surveyed believe that they deserve at least a B in a course if they do "most of the reading."
- Twenty-five percent of students in the study believe that a professor should be willing to hand out his or her course notes.
- Some 10 percent of students believe that professors should arrange meetings with students at a time that is best for students even if it is inconvenient for the professor, or that professors should let students turn in assignments late if students have vacation plans.

The Narcissism Epidemic

How should SSAOs and faculty address this cultural shift in students and younger staff members? First, campus life can be structured in a manner that matches students' values and expectations and also fits with institutional values and the welfare of all students. Second, policies and practices can be implemented that mitigate narcissism.

In adapting to the narcissism epidemic, SSAOs should consider the following factors:

Personal impact. Emphasize that the actions of students and younger staff members can have a personal impact and "make a difference." Do not direct them to do something; tell them why their actions are important. Listen to students' ideas as part of a true dialogue, and the result can lead to greater student satisfaction and action.

Reality check. Students today have greater expectations of success than their counterparts a decade ago. As a result, it is important to acknowledge their academic and career goals and support them as much as possible. At the same time, these goals are often unrealistic so efforts to present more realistic options are also important. For example, many students who want to go to medical school will not qualify. Students who are not likely candidates for medical school can be presented with a broader range of possibilities for careers in healthcare.

Flexibility. Expect requests for flexible schedules and excused absences. Faculty face this issue constantly and it may occur among student affairs staff as well. For example, at the University of Georgia, there is a longstanding debate about days off for major football games. Build in flexibility whenever possible, but only to the extent that it does not compromise the mission of your institution.

Praise. Most young people today were raised with abundant praise and little negative feedback. Grade school awards are now rampant. High school grades are significantly inflated compared to the 1970s—twice as many students have A averages. Students are used to constant praise. When possible, give praise and criticism in that order.

Empathy. The students with the greatest sense of entitlement often demand, and get, the most attention, which can

cause resentment among faculty and staff. If this is an issue for your staff, consider practicing greater empathy. Understand that young people are products of their culture. They did not raise themselves; they adapted to a world that was presented to them. Furthermore, when you talk to students about their experiences, they often note that one-upmanship and materialism cause feelings of competitiveness and anxiety. Many young people believe they need to keep up or they will be left behind. When talking with students, acknowledge the heightened competition, but also explain that life is complex. It is almost impossible to predict what one will be doing or where one will be in 20 years. Rather than join the rush, it is better for students to cultivate abilities, skills, and a reputation for integrity that will serve them well throughout their lifetimes.

Institutional Response to the Narcissism Epidemic

Three major strategies can help minimize narcissism on college and university campuses: encourage responsibility, build connection, and increase passion.

Narcissism, both individually and culturally, leads to an unwillingness to take personal responsibility for one's less positive behaviors and for the state of the community. At colleges and universities this is evidenced by "grade grubbing," cheating, excuse-making, and other negative behaviors. These types of behaviors can be reduced by encouraging students to take personal responsibility and by establishing sanctions against cheating or dishonesty. Since few students are actually caught cheating, an alternative policy might mandate a slighter punishment, such as a grade of a zero on an assignment, but with much broader enforcement.

Ideally, efforts should be made across institutions to create climates of responsibility. Highly internalized honor codes, which can contribute to such climates, often have a positive effect on student behavior. In addition, the creation of statements of student rights and responsibilities can clarify relationships with faculty and with other students. These statements are two-way streets, requiring faculty and parent buy-in. With faculty and administrators dealing with increasing complaints from parents about the treatment of their adult children, student rights and responsibilities statements can clarify the role of parents and help them understand that independence is in the best interests of their children.

Building connections is one of the great antidotes to narcissism. In lab research, for example, telling two people that they share the same birthday or the same rare fingerprint reduces narcissistic aggression. Campus connections can occur at the community level—school identity or school "spirit" is the classic example—but can also be encouraged in residence halls, within coursework, and across colleges. Compassion on campus can be cultivated through volunteer opportunities and service-learning, and students can gain a broadened perspective by attending guest lectures from speakers who share different views of the world.

Finally, passion mitigates narcissism. Passion, or what psychologists call "intrinsic motivation," can inspire students to do things that bring them joy and satisfaction. Passion motivates them to pursue work they love, and helps them become stronger and more grounded individuals. Some psychologists

even use the term "flow" to describe the experience of intense intrinsic motivation.

In recent years, the academic enterprise has become more and more extrinsic, with a focus on the external motivators of reward, fame, attention, or popularity. Bringing back passion to college and university life is important, but it goes against recent trends for universities to mimic super-sized elementary schools with learning objectives, rounds of testing, and modular instruction. Some would argue that the last outposts of passionate education are liberal arts colleges and graduate education in select fields.

All of us in higher education are in the passion business. There is nothing more enjoyable and inspiring than learning about a favorite subject. Yet we often lose sight of those joys because of external and internal pressures to become a "credit-hour production business" or "degree business" or "fancy residence hall and facilities" business.

Find space in your academic environment for passion. Encourage parallel learning environments outside of formal classrooms with expert speakers and discussion groups. Give students early opportunities for lab experiences, teaching assistantships, or community learning experiences. Academic passion is a great asset that must be brought back to center stage.

Return to Love of Learning

This is not the happiest time to be in higher education. College and university budgets are shrinking. The demands on administrators, faculty, and staff are systematically increasing, and students too often behave like consumers who want to be catered to rather than as members of a wider academic family. In many institutions, there is the sense that a love of learning has taken a back seat to grade grubbing.

Beyond those students demonstrating troubled or entitled behavior, many terrific students are trying to better themselves and the world. Our campuses are filled with individuals who want to make a difference. When it comes to the narcissism epidemic, higher education must live with it and attempt to change it. Use narcissism as a tool to attract and gain the attention of students, then turn it around to make students more engaged, more productive, and more compassionate—as well as more passionate—people. ■

Meet the Author

Jean Twenge shares her work on "The Narcissism Epidemic" at the 2010 NASPA Annual Conference. Attend her presentation on Tuesday, March 9, from 9:30 to 11:45 a.m. in the Chicago Ballroom at the Sheraton Hotel.

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