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Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

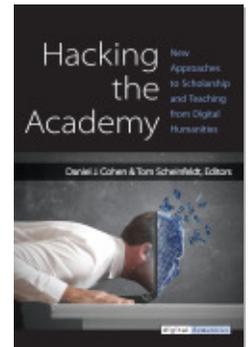
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Dear Students

Gideon Burton

Dear students:

I'm about to say something a college professor shouldn't say to his students, but I care about you a lot so I'm prepared to break the code and say what needs to be said: Your college experience is likely to set back your education, your career, and your creative potential. Ironically, this will be done in the name of education. You deserve to know about this! You have what it takes to reclaim, reform, and remix your education. Don't let college unplug your future!

Reality Check no. 1: The Digital World Is Your Home Campus

You already know this on some level. The campus for your education isn't made principally of buildings and books; it's made mostly of microchips and media. Any other school is a satellite now, subordinate to the main, digital campus where you reside and thrive. And since you grew up digital, you've been matriculated since the first click of a mouse button, with no need ever to graduate. Your world of learning and your world of play are seamless in the digital domain, and you are pretty much a senior on that campus, even in your teens. You spend your spare cash to get that iPhone or laptop, and you move effortlessly between virtual and physical worlds. The reality check is that physical schools and structured curricula and degree-seeking programs form a system that makes enormous demands upon you, but which is fundamentally out of sync with the fact that your identity, development, education, and success will be intimately intertwined with the digital domain.

And why shouldn't they be? No generation of youth has ever lived in a more exciting era than ours, nor learned in more compelling ways than are granted to you electronically today. Frontiers of opportunity have been opened for you through digital means that would make Cortés weep at

how comparatively little spoil he carted off from the Aztecs. Each of you can reach across the planet, exploring the topography of our world with the ease of a soaring bird. You can befriend others from foreign places and cultures with the click of a key. You can get up-to-the-minute updates from a robot on Mars on your cell phone, or Google Alexandrian libraries with an ease that would surpass the fantasies of generations of scholars. You can be a spectator to the cosmos or to the local city-council meeting. But your new world does not leave you watching on the sidelines! You can share your lifestream, add your perspective to countless conversations, and have the world comment back—interacting with people who will value your ideas and your style. And what style! Modes of creative expression are being opened to your generation that none have known before. You can shape and share your identity in a thousand different ways, testing what you like, feeding your own passions, carving your own way. What a fantastic time to be alive!

Reality Check no. 2: Surviving in the Real World

Hold on. It's one thing to trick out your avatar for the metaverse of your choice or suction Limewire for some fresh tracks, but what about earning your bread? Generations of parents and high-school counselors have convinced you that college is the answer. After all, how are you going to get a job if you can't show that shiny sheepskin to the suit across the desk from you in the personnel department? Blogging won't pay the bills! Maybe not.

Reality Check no. 3: Sheepskin vs. Online Identity

It will be a long time before a college diploma is as quaint as, say, getting a public notary's stamp. But there is another system already competing with college, and it will start those bean counters in the tuition office sweating soon enough. This alternative to college credentials is as huge as the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters*, and he's towering over the skyline right where town meets gown: online identity.

That's right. Who you are and what you've done will in the very near future be so well documented by your online activities that a resume will be redundant. The time will come when a college degree will be sus-

pect if not complemented by an admirable online record—and I'm not talking about transcripts. Your transcripts will consist of your lifestream: your blog, your social networks, your creative work published or otherwise represented online. Cyberspace is already more real to you than the physical space of your college campus—and it is becoming so for your future employers.

Sincerely,
A concerned professor