

# Credentialed But Illiterate: The Reading Crisis at the Heart of Education

By Patrick Keeney

In his trenchant essay, "[The Average College Student Is Illiterate](#)," Hilarius Bookbinder sounds the alarm over the precipitous decline in student literacy.



It is a sobering account. Bookbinder (a pseudonym) teaches in the humanities and draws upon years of classroom experience. He observes that many of his students are functionally illiterate. They are unable to engage with serious adult literature and often

find the very act of reading tedious. As a result, they avoid it whenever possible. This aversion manifests in predictable ways: skimming texts without comprehension, failing to identify key arguments, and struggling with exam questions simply because they haven't read them carefully.

His reflections reveal the troubling reality of liberal learning today and the formidable challenge educators face in fostering genuine intellectual engagement. Bookbinder places the blame squarely on society. "I don't blame K-12 teachers," he writes. "This is not an educational system problem. This is a societal problem."

Of course, he has a point, but this is too lenient. It overlooks the significant structural failures within the K–12 system itself—failures that have deprioritized foundational literacy, neglected intellectual rigor, and left students unprepared for the demands of higher education.

Over the past several decades, elementary and secondary schools have increasingly adopted a pedagogical model prioritizing technological fluency and emotional well-being over developing serious intellectual habits. As one parent noted in response to Bookbinder’s piece, children are now “pushed into technology (computers, iPads) as early as kindergarten” and “are not required to read entire books, let alone write about them.”

This new orthodoxy exalts engagement over comprehension, screen fluency over print literacy, and the consequence is a generation of students ill-equipped for the demands of higher education.

More troubling still is the retreat from rigor. In the name of preserving students’ self-esteem, schools are often reluctant to challenge students, hold them accountable, or insist upon high standards of excellence. The result is a dangerous turn to what has been called the therapeutic approach to education. Students are flattered rather than instructed, and their self-esteem is affirmed regardless of whether they have done anything estimable. The essential work of education—discerning truth from error, cultivating judgment, introducing the young to the intellectual heritage of their civilization—is displaced by therapeutic aims.

When these students arrive at university, their failure becomes apparent. Every professor has stories—students who cannot follow a basic line of reasoning, who confuse anecdote with argument, or who, without the slightest embarrassment, announce that they are “not readers,” as though this were a harmless personal quirk rather than a disqualification from

serious intellectual life. Once isolated anecdotes, such stories are now commonplace, as Bookbinder documents.

The university effectively becomes a triage center for the wounded products of a broken educational pipeline. Professors are increasingly urged to accommodate: to simplify readings, moderate expectations, and reward effort rather than genuine achievement. The result has been a steady erosion of standards and academic benchmarks.

But this is not merely an educational failure. It is a moral one. Literacy is not simply a technical skill—it is a form of ethical and intellectual development. It requires cultivating patience, empathy, and sound judgment. It demands that we sit still and listen attentively to the minds and voices of others. If students cannot do this, then we are not educating them. At best, we are merely credentialing them.

To be literate, in the fullest sense, is to participate in the great conversation of civilization. It is to gain access to and be initiated into the shared understandings of a community. A liberal education, properly understood, is neither vocational training nor a self-esteem project. It is a moral and intellectual discipline that presupposes a conception of the good and an account of the human person as more than a bundle of appetites or a mere consumer. It sees the human being as a moral agent, capable of self-transcendence and shaping a life toward truth, beauty, and meaning.

We deceive ourselves if we believe the decline in student literacy is a neutral development. We must resist the fashionable cynicism that shrugs and says this is simply the way of the world. We are told that deep reading is obsolete in the internet age, with its endless screens and omnipresent mobile phones. Our society increasingly treats the reading of serious texts not as an essential ability at the core of educational engagement, but as a quaint indulgence from a

bygone era.

Such resignation is not only intellectually lazy but morally perilous. The capacity to read deeply, write clearly, follow and test a line of reasoning—these are habits of mind without which neither democracy nor the life of the mind can flourish.

Education has always been about elevation. Liberal learning, as the name implies, is about liberating the individual from the contingencies and limitations of his or her birth. It is the deliberate act of lifting students' minds above distraction, above appetite, above the noise of the present moment.

To “meet students where they are” may be a necessary pedagogical starting point, but it must never be mistaken for the destination. The true aim of education is not to affirm students as they are, but to form them into what they might become. It is to awaken their capacities for reason, imagination, and judgment—and to summon them toward the best versions of themselves.

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