Snobbery in the academy is alive and well and doing harm

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Abstract
A female engineering student walked into her first lab class. One of the male students said: “The cookery class is in another room.”

A professor was always willing to drop everything to talk with a colleague. But when one of his research assistants contacted him, he would say to come back later.

A student wanted to do a survey and commented to a mathematician friend: “I think I’ll seek advice from some sociologists.” The mathematician responded: “What would they know about it?”

Snobbery is a sense of superiority or exclusiveness, often expressed with condescending comments or actions that reject others. Snobbery is found throughout societies. Some people look down on those with less money or who live in a low-status suburb or who don’t speak with the right accent.

Then there is snobbery about countries, films, food, manners and knowledge. “Don’t tell me you listen to country music!”

Keywords
well, harm, doing, snobbery, academy, alive

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
Martin, B. and Sorensen, M. J. (2014). Snobbery in the academy is alive and well and doing harm. The Conversation, 16 October

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/2003
Snobbery in the academy is alive and well and doing harm

October 16, 2014 11.29am AEDT
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If you’ve ever felt as though professors treat you with less than respect, you’re probably not alone. Flickr, CC BY-SA

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**Snobbery in universities**

You might imagine that universities would be free of snobbery, because everyone is involved in a quest for knowledge and scholars are supposed to make judgements about ideas, not about people. Anyone who has been around people in universities will soon hear plenty of stories to the contrary.
When we started investigating academic snobbery, we discovered that everyone we spoke to had a story to tell. There were stories about arrogant professors, about snooty students and about individuals who thought they were superior to just about anyone. There are some relevant writings about emotions in academia and, more bluntly, about “academic arseholes”.

Academic snobbery comes in multiple forms - for instance, connected with a person’s university, field of study or position. Teachers who are on short-term contracts may not be treated as real colleagues. At conferences junior scholars may be ignored by leading figures in the field.

Those at the bottom of the status hierarchy are invisible. This sort of environment breeds snobbery.

Many students gain their sense of value from their peers and from their achievements at school and university. Snide comments about their clothes, tastes and intellectual skills can be deeply hurtful.

However, this type of snobbery has consequences beyond the immediate effects on people’s emotions. When teachers make belittling comments about students, it can cause some students to quit. Some junior scholars may even reject an academic career because of the patronising attitudes of senior figures.

Another possible consequence for universities is that relevant questions and concerns are not addressed because they don’t come from the right sorts of people. Or research findings may be ignored because they come from the wrong discipline.

Snobbery is not good for universities in another way. If members of the public think academics are inflated with self-importance, they are less likely to support universities when it comes to funding or academic freedom.

**What to do?**

One of the challenges is that those who behave snobbishly often don’t even realise it. They believe they really are superior. They make comments that are condescending without even thinking about it.

Some say: “Just ignore the snobbery. Don’t let it affect you.” That’s easier said than done.

Aside from advice to ignore snobbery, what can be done? There’s lots of research about envy, scorn, inequality, groupishness and other relevant topics, some of it very insightful. However, it seems that researchers have paid little attention to practical techniques to counter snobbery.

We drew some insights from the work of Berit Ås and from a body of research on tactics against injustice, and came up with a set of possible responses to snobbery.

One option is simply to avoid people who are snobbish, though this isn’t always possible. Another option is to make a formal complaint, but this may be seen as over-reacting.
Then there is reverse snobbery. Imagine one student saying to another: “I can understand why you want to study medicine, but I decided on visual arts because it’s more challenging.” The trouble is that reverse snobbery doesn’t do anything to stop snobbery more generally.

Directly challenging snobbish comments is a delicate operation. You might try the serious, rational approach of countering condescending comments. In response to a colleague’s derogatory comment about a lower-status university, you might say: “Actually, there is plenty of good work being done there.”

Our favourite option is to counter snobbery by using humour. After a “centre of excellence” involving just a few academics was set up in a department, one of those left out put a sign on his door: “Peripheral mediocrity.”

Just because snobbery is such an everyday matter doesn’t mean we should ignore it. It can have quite damaging effects.

For those who care about creating a more inclusive, equal society where people try to help each other to improve, it is worth practising skills to avoid, counter or deflate snobbery. Changes are also needed in cultures and organisations.