

College in the Media:

Pitch Perfect

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While movies about young adults are often very entertaining, they are also rarely completely accurate. It is productive to consider the ways in which *Pitch Perfect* correctly or incorrectly portrays college life. One reason for this is because of expectations younger students may develop regarding what their experience will be like in higher education. Another reason why these considerations should be made is because there is always room for improvement; both in film and in higher education. The more realistic a movie is, the more likely it is that people will identify with the characters or the scenarios and enjoy the movie more, making it a greater success. In higher education, considering the ‘advice’ of movies may be helpful because the media provides an outsider view of issues which higher education encounters. This paper will compare the portrayal of higher education in *Pitch Perfect* to the reality of higher education and make recommendations to both higher education and to the entertainment industry based on these comparisons.

Synopsis

Pitch Perfect is a musical comedy set at the fictional Barden University (BU), which is based on Louisiana State University (LSU). The movie was also filmed in part on the LSU campus. The main character, Beca, is a first year student who would rather be working at a record label than going to college. However, since her father is a professor in comparative literature at BU, she is attending at no cost. A few weeks into the first semester Beca’s father makes a deal with her after discovering she is skipping a class. He tells her that if she makes an effort to get involved and still does not like college after a year, he will help her move to Los Angeles to work at a record label. Beca decides to audition for the Barden Bellas, one of four a cappella groups on campus. She had met the two upperclassmen members the day she moved into her residence hall, during the activities fair.

The Barden Bellas are desperate for members after an embarrassing disaster at the ICCA (International Competition of Collegiate A Cappella) finals the previous spring. After the auditions they compile an eclectic group of women for their all-female a cappella group. They struggle to learn choreography and to agree on the types of songs the group should be performing. The leader, Aubrey, is very controlling of the group. As the Bella's progress through the various levels of competition, they continue to use the same songs for their performances. During the semifinals they are eliminated and the group separates. However, over spring break it is discovered that one of the groups which beat the Bellas had cheated, so they are once again in the competition at the ICCA finals. After the Bellas argue about a fight Aubrey and Beca had after the last competition, Aubrey realizes she has to let go of control. The Bellas turn to Beca to create an arrangement for their final performance. At the ICCA finals the Bellas shock and amaze the judges and the audience by 'shedding their Bella uniforms' and opting for a more modern sound.

Critique

Overall, *Pitch Perfect* is a fairly accurate portrayal of higher education and issues students in higher education face. One example of this is that Beca does not get along with her roommate, Kimmy Jin, which can be a common problem among first year students as they encounter personalities they had not previously encountered. Beca is enrolled in at least one general education credit, Introduction to Philosophy, which is also typical for first year students, although her other classes are not revealed. The following discussions are further examples of the portrayal of higher education in *Pitch Perfect*.

“Have you been out on the quad? In the spring all the students like to study there” (Moore, 2012).

This quote is heard near the beginning of the movie and is spoken by Dr. Mitchell, Becca's father. At many post-secondary institutions there are typical spots where students study, so it is an accurate portrayal for the same to be true at Barden University. This example is characteristic of possibilism (Strange & Banning, 2001) at BU, meaning that the physical environment may restrict certain behaviors but may also promote other behaviors. This demonstrates possibilism because the quad may have been designed to allow studying to occur in that area. If there are comfortable tables or chairs, this could be part of what the university has done to promote studying as well as socializing in the quad. Alternatively, this use of the quad could be an example of the constructed environment. While libraries and residence hall rooms are two traditional places for college students to study, other areas in and around campuses often become popular study spaces based on the way students view and utilize them. Traditional spaces, such as the library, can be utilized by students to the point where the number of students in the space causes it to become a distracting environment. A suggestion which can be made to higher education is to observe other spaces students use to study and complete class work, and make those spaces more conducive to those activities. To do this, institutions could extend hours of a student center or other space where students like to study. Alternatively, if an institution observes that student prefer a specific outdoor location, tables can be placed there.

Activities Fair

Activities fairs, involvement fairs, and club days are all common on college campuses as a way of advertising the various ways to get involved on campus to the student body. In *Pitch Perfect*, the Activity Fair at Barden University took place the same day that students were moving in. Generally speaking, this is inaccurate because typically first year students move in before the upperclassman to allow time to settle and in some cases time for orientation. By

depicting that the activity fair took place the day the first year students moved in, this film insinuated that the upperclassman had returned to campus *before* the first year students arrived. Despite the inaccuracy this scene illustrates a very important aspect of the BU environment; the human aggregate environment. Various student clubs are shown in this scene including a Deaf Jews club, water polo, fraternities, Quidditch, Korean Student Association, ballroom, and power lifters as well as others. This illustrates the diversity of students attending BU which is representative of the vast number of interests students in post-secondary education have. Most higher education institutions make an effort to provide opportunities for their students to feel involved and attached to the campus. It is from Tinto's seminal work that the tradition of working towards retaining students through involvement has grown. Tinto named failure to integrate with social life at an institution as one of the main reasons students do not persist in higher education (1993). Holding these activities fairs makes it very easy for students to locate other students who are like them or share similar interests. This then makes it more appealing and also easier for students to get involved on campus and ultimately persist.

Other than a suggestion to make the timing of the activity fair at Barden University more realistic, there are no recommendations for film makers regarding this example. However, one very interesting difference in the film creates a suggestion for higher education. The activity fair at BU in *Pitch Perfect* was held outside in a large open area. This allowed various clubs and organizations to be spread out and in some cases very interactive. If institutions were to encourage more interactive activity fairs over the more common informational tables, students may enjoy better outcomes in terms of how involved they become. The limitation on this suggestion is that the more organizations and ways an institution has for students to get involved and the larger population of students, the larger area the institution would need to implement this

suggestion. In most cases the space may simply not be available. If Penn State, for example, were to implement this however, they could expand the Involvement Fair, which is held each semester on the first three days of classes, from Heritage Hall (a single room) to spread throughout the HUB Robeson Student Center.

“Join one club on campus, and if then, at the end of the year, you still don’t want to be here- you still want to go off to L.A. and be P. Diddy, well, then you can quit college. And I will help you move to L.A.”

Dr. Mitchell, Beca’s father, says this to her after finding her in her room skipping her Introduction to Philosophy class. While telling a college student that if they get involved and still do not enjoy college support will be given to them for an alternative goal makes sense from a student affairs perspective, it is unlikely from a faculty perspective. It is clear from Dr. Mitchell’s offer that he really believes that if Beca gets involved at Barden University that she will then enjoy college and want to stay. In order to put this in context it is important to remember that Barden University is modeled after Louisiana State University (a research institution) and that Dr. Mitchell is a faculty member there. It is not completely out of the question that faculty members feel strongly about co-curricular involvement. Generally, they may be more likely to find only relevant involvement beneficial (i.e. professional organizations or organizations dedicated to a student’s major) and likely do not understand the full benefits students which receive from co-curricular involvement. When Dr. Mitchell proposes that when Beca gets involved she will want to stay in college, it raises an interesting point about the human aggregate environment on college campuses. The three types of people in this scenario are faculty members, student affairs professionals, and students. The interaction between these three types of people is the largest contribution to the human aggregate environment of college

campuses. In some cases the influence of faculty members is stronger than that of student affairs practitioners. Typically students see their faculty members on a more regular basis (up to 4 times per week in class or more outside of class) and therefore their opinions about things (ex: curricular activities) may be heard more than those of student affairs practitioner. Students who spend more time with their faculty and instructors, such as students in the sciences, may be more likely to experience that than other students.

In *Pitch Perfect*, once Beca does get involved, at the insistence of her father, it is clear that her dedication to and interest in Barden University grows. This is congruent with the works of Astin in his theory of involvement (1999) and with Tinto's theory on retention (1993). As Beca became more involved she became more likely to persist. The insinuation from the film is that Beca would continue her education at Barden University past her first year. While the depiction that Dr. Mitchell would advocate strongly for co-curricular activities seems unlikely, it is encouraging for students and for student affairs professionals. This is a matter which institutions of higher education can consider in terms of something they can encourage with their faculty. One suggestion on how to encourage faculty to promote co-curricular involvement to their students is by educating them. If education and learning theories are not the area of specialization for a faculty member they may not even realize how beneficial co-curricular involvement can be for students. Therefore, by providing a seminar, webinar, or even informational email about the theories and research behind co-curricular learning for students, student affairs professionals can encourage faculty to promote this to students. This has the potential to lead to improved outcomes for students in terms of retention and even in their classroom learning.

Conclusion

The producers of *Pitch Perfect* created an interestingly accurate portrayal of an institution of higher education. There are two recommendations to make in addition to those mentioned above, which were adjusting the timeline of when Barden University's activity fair was held and considering how likely it is for a faculty member to strongly support co-curricular involvement. The first recommendation is to include scenes of Beca, or another student in classrooms. It was difficult to assess the overall environment of Barden University without that perspective. Additionally, for viewers of the movie it also creates a skewed vision of what college is or should be. The lack of classroom scenes or scenes where schoolwork was being completed by students may make an audience believe that students need little to no time to prepare for classes, or that students never go to class. Regardless of the impression it leaves with audiences, the lack of classroom and homework scenes in this film leave out an important part of higher education. A second recommendation for the producers of *Pitch Perfect* is to consider the message that is being sent by the initiation night scene. This scene depicted a celebration of the four a cappella groups the night they selected their new members. In this scene the students are in an open area, clearly on campus, and drinking alcohol openly. While underage alcohol consumption is common on college campuses the media should consider its responsibility in promoting these behaviors.

Regarding advice which higher education can take from *Pitch Perfect*, most recommendations were made above. This included educating faculty about the benefits co-curricular involvement has for students, expanding space available for activity fairs, and adjusting intended uses for spaces based on how students truly use them.

The interesting part of the comparison between the portrayal of higher education in *Pitch Perfect* and the actualities of higher education is that there were more significant

recommendations to make for higher education. While there was a higher number of recommendations made to the producers of this movie and media in general, those were largely suggestions for consideration and smaller matters. The recommendations to higher education have possibility for much more impact. Due to the fact that many of society's expectations are formed by what they see in the media, media portrayal of education has the potential for large effects. There is always room for improvement in both media and education and comparison of the two is a productive way to search for suggested improvements.

References

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