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ADVICE

Obsessed With Smartness



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By James M. Lang | FEBRUARY 12, 2017

Every year around this time, those of us on a college campus begin to engage in an ancient ritual — talking about the quality of next year’s incoming class.

The end of winter and the emergence of spring is when I start to overhear, or participate in, conversations with my peers or with admissions staffers about how smart our next year’s students will be. Our admissions office ranks prospective students on a numerical system, and everyone wants to know the new numbers: How many 1s and 2s are we getting? How many 7s or 8s? We cock our heads and consider the ratios,

hoping for the best possible batch of students.

Faculty members have good reason to be interested in those numbers. An incoming class with an unusually large number of students who have been poorly prepared for college will change the nature of what we do. We will have to spend more time working on basic skills in our courses, and less time devoted to the kinds of higher-order cognitive skills and challenges that drew most professors to their disciplines and to an academic career.

A wide range in ability also presents complex pedagogical challenges: How do we teach a roomful of college students who include both academic stars and the seriously underprepared?

Our administration, of course, has a keen eye on the admissions numbers as well. Like most college leaders, our president will announce the statistics about the brightness of next year’s class at various campus events. Our rankings from publications like *U.S. News & World Report* will depend significantly on our selectivity in the admissions process and upon the quality of our incoming class.

Across academe, the obsession with drawing smart students has dripped down onto the radar even of high-school students, who look at selectivity numbers to determine the quality of the institutions to which they are applying.

According to a 2016 book by Alexander W. Astin, a longtime analyst of higher education, the collective desire of our colleges and universities to fill beds and seats with the brightest students suggests we have lost our way. In *Are You Smart Enough? How Colleges’ Obsession With Smartness Shortchanges Students*, Astin argues that our narrow-minded pursuit of the smartest students not only contradicts the very purpose of higher education, but perpetuates the economic inequalities that many faculty members fight against in their work.

I can present the core of Astin’s argument with two contrasting verbs — acquire and develop.

The "pecking order" of higher education — and the ratings that we use to establish the quality of our colleges and universities — has come to depend almost entirely on *acquiring* smart students, Astin writes. Colleges receive their place in the latest magazine rankings, in large part, based on their selectivity in admissions, and upon factors like retention and degree-completion rates. Guarding those rates leads us to select the best possible students — because, of course, they are the ones most easily retained and most likely to graduate.

The real purpose of a college education, by contrast, should be to *develop* smart students. Their development depends not on the quality of the entering class but on the quality of our teaching and the ability of our institutions to cultivate intellectual and affective skills. If our campuses were driven primarily by a desire to develop student talents, the quality of the incoming class would matter far less than it does now. Our concern would shift away from acquisition and toward development.

In short, Astin claims: "College officials pay much more attention to the test scores of their entering students than to how much these scores improve during college."

Just how absurd is our approach? Astin offers this analogy: "This would be the equivalent of judging a clinic or hospital on the basis of the condition of the patients it admits rather than the effectiveness of the care and treatment patients receive once they are admitted."

That might seem like an obvious point to some — although I had never quite put it to myself in such stark terms. But the analogy leads us to an even more important point about the implications of this system for the educational and economic inequities that so many of us in higher education would seek to remedy.

Our emphasis on the acquisition of talent means that our richest, highest-ranking institutions are largely closed to underprepared students. That, Astin argues, gets it completely backward. If we really cared about equity, our best institutions would focus not on acquiring already smart students and making them a little bit smarter but on helping promising yet underprepared students achieve their potential.

Many top institutions probably believe they already do that. They have programs designed to encourage and support nontraditional students, and many now claim to look beyond test scores to see the whole applicant.

The reality simply doesn't bear out the rhetoric. Astin makes a convincing case by analyzing the incredibly stable rankings of top-rated institutions over time, and their reliance on standardized test scores in the admissions process. Underprepared students know full well that they will not gain admission to top colleges and universities — and so never bother to apply there. When they do, they can't compete against students who can afford expensive schools, test-preparation courses, private tutors, and admission consultants.

Our admissions processes are, thus, perpetuating social and economic inequities. "Underprepared students," Astin argues, "include disproportionate numbers of poor students and underrepresented students of color, so such unequal treatment tends to exacerbate inequalities of wealth, power, and race that have already reached unacceptable levels in the United States."

In response to that situation, Astin makes two claims:

- "The education of the underprepared students is the most important issue in American higher education."
- "Providing more effective education for such students would not only further the cause of educational equity but also help alleviate some of our most serious social and economic problems."

I find it hard to argue with either statement. But I can anticipate at least one objection: Institutions of higher education need to shape our smartest students into leaders and thinkers who will change our future, so helping our most talented students find direction and gain new knowledge and skills should remain a priority for top universities. No doubt.

But that doesn't mean that we can't find ways to draw more students from the underprepared population, help those students succeed in college, and shift our rhetorical focus away from acquisition and toward development of student talent.

To faculty readers, all of this might sound like good work for the administration and the admissions office, but Astin doesn't let us off the hook quite so easily.

"Over the years," he writes, "college and university faculty have become more focused on displaying their own smartness and on identifying and stockpiling smart students and colleagues than on developing smartness in their students." He points to multiple elements of faculty culture in support of this claim — most notably, the emphasis on research over teaching in tenure-and-promotion processes.

Part of me wants to argue with Astin pinning the blame for those ills on faculty. I can assure him, for example, that this faculty member does not play much of a role in determining how many publications a faculty member needs to obtain tenure on my campus. Likewise, the final chapter of Astin's book includes a list of "relevant issues and practices over which faculty have primary control," one of which was "continuing heavy reliance on standardized tests like the SAT." Again, I have never been consulted or invited to a conversation about the role of SAT scores in the admissions process at my college. I don't see that as an issue under my "primary control."

Another part of me, however, recognizes that — while Astin may overestimate faculty control over these policies — I am probably underestimating it. Those hallway conversations with my peers about the quality of our incoming class, and our shared desire to acquire the smartest-possible students, do not occur in a void. I help create and sustain the campus culture that views our current and prospective students in these terms, and I can undoubtedly help push for change.

The final chapter of Astin's book poses the question you are likely wondering about yourself: "Is There Any Way Out?"

I will leave it to readers to see whether they find Astin's recommendations convincing. Critiquing a system always comes more easily than proposing alternatives and solutions, and the bulk of the book focuses on the critique. But I found Astin's critique an essential first step. Now I have to do some thinking about what a way out — if one exists — might look like on my campus and in the system as a whole.

In the wake of the recent presidential election, many academics are reflecting on how we can ensure equity and opportunity for people who have traditionally been marginalized by our society. My Twitter feed brims with recommendations from activist scholars on how to become a political advocate for these causes.

Alexander Astin's book — which I recommend to anyone who cares about equity and opportunity in higher education — offers two sobering reminders: Our quest for social justice for our students can begin on our own campuses. And faculty voices can make a difference in changing a culture that values the students we admit more highly than the students we graduate.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, in Worcester, Mass. His latest book, Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning, was published in the spring of 2016. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.

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