Do Colleges Identify or Develop Intelligence?

By Randy Moore

To avoid the damaging effects of underprepared students on a school's reputation, these schools simply exclude them from campus.

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ABSTRACT: Most colleges and universities emphasize identifying smartness much more than developing smartness. This value is made explicit in the many influential rankings of colleges and universities, in which elitist schools who recruit students with high SAT scores, grade point averages, and class rankings are declared "better" than other schools. The pursuit of high academic rankings (a) often is accompanied by a disdain for underprepared students who lower a school's ranking and (b) often contradicts the alleged desire to promote educational opportunities for groups of students who are placed at a strong disadvantage by factors such as SAT scores.

Most colleges, especially those wanting to be "top-tier" (i.e., ranked in the top tier of the various rankings), place a tremendous emphasis on recruiting "the best" students; after all, those students are usually motivated and easy to teach. However, the fact that colleges emphasize *recruiting* smart students much more than *developing* smart students has important consequences. The rankings of colleges and universities are influenced heavily by the academic quality of the students that colleges recruit; that's why some of the most heavily-weighted factors in the rankings are students' SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores, class rank, and grade point average.

This emphasis on recruiting the best students is reported in popular magazines, such as *U.S. News & World Report,* that rate the quality of U.S. colleges and universities (Crissey, 1997). These ratings are based on a variety of factors, ranging from library holdings to endowment and alumni giving. The rankings are very influential; indeed, the "rankings issues" of these magazines are invariably the magazines' best-sellers, selling almost twice as many copies as a typical issue (Gottlieb, 1999; Kersten, 2000), and many parents use the rankings as a quick and easy way to sort information when deciding where to send their children to college (Kersten, 2000; Levin, 2003). Realizing the profits that can be made in the college-bound market, magazines such as *Time*, *Money*, and *Newsweek* all now publish "college rankings issues" each year (Crissey, 1997). Even paperback-book versions of the ratings summaries sell a million copies (Gottlieb, 1999).

Another View of the "Ratings Race"

Inherent in the many academic rankings of colleges and universities is an explicit disdain for students who aren't necessarily the "best and brightest." Administrators at elite schools (i.e., schools ranked high by *U.S. News & World Report*), as well as those at schools wanting to be elite schools, know that admitting underprepared students lowers a school's academic ranking. Although having programs to help these underprepared students does not affect other courses, the elitism and accompanying contempt for underprepared students is often explicit. For example, many faculty view the teaching of at-risk, underprepared students as being unglamorous, unimportant, and demeaning (Astin, 2000), and many faculty and administrators worry that admitting underprepared students will reduce the school's academic standards. As noted by Texas A&M University's former president Ray Bowen, "I'm concerned that people who want to come to school here, who have high SAT scores, don't feel that they are diminished [by nonelite students]" (Selingo & Brainard, 2001, p. A21). Astin (2000) is more explicit:

> The underprepared student is a kind of pariah in American higher education, and some of the reasons are obvious. Since most of us believe that the excellence of our departments and of our institutions depends on enrolling the very best-prepared students that we can, to admit underprepared students would pose a real threat to our excellence. (p. 131)

To avoid the damaging effects of underprepared students on a school's reputation, these schools simply exclude them from campus, much like many high schools exclude the scores of at-risk students to ensure that the schools' average scores on assessment tests are high (Olson, 2002).

Although public colleges and universities

have the ability to focus important resources on civic life in America, issues such as civic responsibility, citizenship, and similar topics directly related to civic engagement are seldom mentioned in discussions of curriculum reform, and are seldom considered by publications such as *U.S. News & World Report* in their rankings of colleges and universities (Astin, 2000). The various ranking systems also ignore the societal purposes of education. For example, the ranking systems give no credit to a school for achieving a diverse campus, producing a family's first generation of college graduates, recruiting and graduating minority students, or recruiting and retaining minority faculty. Instead, such reports define excellence and rank the quality of colleges and universities largely by resources, SAT scores, and academic reputation (Astin, 2000). Emphasizing these factors often diverts attention from the many social, economic, cultural, and political factors that influence academic performance.

Institutional competition for academic excellence that accompanies the "ratings chase" is at cross-purposes with societal needs and civic responsibility. For example, 95% of the American public believes that it is important for colleges and universities to "prepare students from minority groups to become successful" (Selingo, 2003, p. A11). Nevertheless, schools that emphasize SAT scores but not diversity or affirmative action usually have higher *U.S. News & World Report* rankings than schools that are strongly committed to affirmative action and racial diversity ("How some colleges improve," 2002). This correlates strongly with many educators' belief that the presence of a high percentage of minority and low-income students will lower a school's academic quality because, on average, minorities and low-income students score significantly lower on standardized tests (e.g., SAT) than affluent White students (Gehring, 2001; "How some colleges improve," 2002; McWhorter, 2001; Owen, 1985; "The expanding racial scoring gap," 2003). Thus, even though some schools enhance their ranking by excluding information about so-called "affirmative action admits" from the data that they submit to *U.S. News & World Report* ("How some colleges improve," 2002, p. 20), it is not surprising that access to top-tier colleges and universities is highly skewed by race and ethnicity and even more skewed by socioeconomic status. For example,

1. African Americans and Hispanics constitute only 6% of the freshmen class of the 146 most selective 4-year colleges, yet they constitute 15% and 13%, respectively, of all 18-year-olds attending college (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Even with affirmative action, African Americans and Hispanics are underrepresented at elite schools.
2. Almost three-fourths of students at top-tier schools are from families in the top socioeconomic quartile, but only 3% come from families in the lowest socioeconomic quartile and only 10% from the bottom half (Carnevale & Rose, 2003).

This educational stratification helps to perpetuate a subsequent economic stratification because students who are admitted to top-tier colleges have higher rates of graduation and greater access to graduate and professional schools than do students who attend other colleges (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1998; Light & Strayer, 2000; "Why Blacks," 2002). These differences occur even for students having similar SAT scores (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Clearly, being an ethnic minority or from a low-income family disproportionately reduces a student's access to an elite school and, therefore, also to the greater opportunities that these schools provide. As noted by Maria Blanco of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the SAT is "a barrier to students of color" because "it keeps out very qualified kids who have overcome obstacles but don't test very well" (Kohn, 2000, p. B13).

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Educators' Influence

Many educators' insist that excellence be defined by the SAT scores and grade point averages of entering freshmen (despite the fact that these scores are often misleading and reveal little about traits such as creativity, leadership, character, and social responsibility). Their stance contradicts these educators' and others' alleged desires to promote educational opportunities for groups of students who are placed at a strong disadvantage by those same SAT scores and grade point averages ("How some colleges improve," 2002; Moore, Jensen, Hsu, & Hatch, 2002). These schools define excellence not by the "value added" (i.e., knowledge and skills gained) to students' lives when they are at college, but instead by what they know when they arrive on campus. As long as colleges continue to identify rather than develop intelligence, higher education will continue to give advantages to those who already have them and, in the process, keep others in their economic place (Astin, 2000). This process, in turn, perpetuates a stratified educational system that inevitably produces stigma. Educators often validate this stratification with rituals (e.g., emphasis on testing, grade-point-averages, and other admissions criteria influenced by ethnicity and socioeconomic class) associated with rankings that (a) portray achievement as being due only to internal, individual traits, such as innate intelligence and (b) make the success of largely upper-class populations who occupy the highest and most influential position appear to result only from individual achievement rather than social privilege (Fine, 2001; Henry, 2001a, 2001b). This allows educators to ignore the troubling and lingering questions about inequitable distributions of resources, unequal opportunity and access, and how the academic achievement of groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, students from lower socioeconomic levels) is influenced by economic, political, and cultural factors (Kozol, 1991). Educators like to tell stories of individuals who overcome odds, even if those stories are atypical; that is why educators promote atypical stories of exceptions (e.g., the poor, inner-city student who became a CEO) rather than stories that describe more typical "norms" (e.g., the poor, inner-city students who do not graduate from high school). However, educators are troubled by explanations of academic outcomes that are based on class inequities, even if those explanations describe common experiences. The stigma attached to the stratified educational system in the U.S. is unmistakable. Note, for example, the stigma that often accompanies students admitted to universities via affirmative action rather than their individual merit (Turner & Pratkanis, 1996).

The traditional approach to dealing with underprepared students has often involved routing them to 2-year institutions. From there, many claim, these students can later obtain access to a 4-year institution if they are willing to work hard enough. It is true that hard work is always a part of success, and community colleges and junior colleges have produced many college graduates. However, continued emphasis on only individual traits such as "hard work" maintains the status quo while perpetuating the myth that all social groups have an equitable access to and chance for academic success. Although the "send-these-students-somewhere-else" approach to education is convenient, 2-year institutions are often dead-ends for at-risk students, and espe-

cially for at-risk students who are ethnic minorities. Indeed, the retention rate of White at-risk students at community colleges is 30%, whereas that for Hispanic and African-American at-risk students is 22% and 10%, respectively (Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1993; Moore, Jensen, & Hatch, 2002). Clearly, the relegation by many 4-year institutions of underprepared students to 2-year institutions is, in the words of Hunter Boylan, "not an educationally sound idea" (Stratton, 1998, p. 27). The issue here is not merely that 2-year institutions have often "been used by the 4-year institution to avoid its responsibility" (Carter, 1978, p. 97). On the contrary, when 4-year institutions insist that all underprepared students be sent to schools at which they have the lowest chance for success (Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1993; Moore, 2002), they often perpetuate social injustice.

The disregard and contempt for underprepared, at-risk students is widespread. For example, many land-grant universities, which were created as "the people's colleges" to extend educational opportunities to all people, continue to "resemble the aristocratic colleges to which they were supposed to provide an alternative" (Zwerling, 1976, p. 56). Similarly, growing numbers of regional state colleges and community colleges, that espouse the mission to educate local residents, are shifting resources to honors programs while leaving the rest of the student body with a bare-bones education (Selingo, 2002). These programs often create a two-tiered system on their campuses: Honors students consume disproportionate amounts of resources, whereas traditional students outside the honors colleges–that is, the at-risk students who often need the most attention–are herded into large, impersonal classes taught by adjunct faculty or teaching assistants (Selingo, 2002). As noted by Frank Newman, a former president of the Education Commission of the States (Selingo, 2002), "state colleges are trying to escape from their mission" (p. A20). The increasing popularity of these elitist approaches at many schools is strongly influenced by the pursuit of higher academic rankings (Selingo, 2002).

A New Approach

The U.S. educational system faces a variety of challenges, including funding, access, and curricular reform. However, as noted by Astin (2000), none of these challenges is as important as educating at-risk students. The continued failure to educate these students will do more to perpetuate many social and economic problems than just about any other influence, because (a) unsupported at-risk students are most likely to drop out of school ("Why Blacks," 2003) and (b) school drop-outs account for disproportionately high percentages of the convicts, poor, unemployed, and welfare recipients in the United States (Astin, 2000). It will be difficult to make much progress on these societal problems if access to realistic educational opportunity continues to be based on measures such as SAT scores that put most at-risk students (and especially those who are ethnic minorities and students from low-income families) at a competitive disadvantage (Moore, Jensen, & Hatch, 2002). To help remedy this problem, top-tier and other selective colleges and universities should consider the following:

Expand the Definitions of "Merit" and "Quality"

Most colleges and universities base admissions decisions on "merit" (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). However, at these schools, merit is typically defined by a students' high school achievements as measured by grades, SAT score, and recommendations, regardless of the context in which the achievements occurred. Each of these criteria often validates systems of privilege (Cloud, 2001; Moore, Jensen, Hsu, & Hatch, 2002; Viadero, 2002) while simultaneously "denying admission to students who will succeed" (Hiss, 2001, p. 10). As noted by Sacks (2002), "the SAT similar college entrance exams … are sorting devices for the bureaucratic convenience of college-admissions officials, tests that sort viciously by class and race, and tests that aren't particularly good predictors of college performance" (p. 32). Admissions officers should redefine "merit" to encompass the context (e.g., socioeconomic status, obstacles overcome) of a student's educational record.

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The unequal opportunities that often typify K-12 education produce many "false negatives" (i.e., students who could succeed in college but are denied a realistic chance to do so; Moore, Jensen, Hsu, & Hatch, 2002). The fact that most ethnic minorities and low-income students have not had the same educational opportunities as other students (Borja, 2001) does not mean that these students cannot succeed in selective colleges and universities. Admissions officers at selective colleges and universities should reward not only where an applicant stands, but also how far they had to go to get there. As noted by The College Board (1999),

> Not all students have had the same educational opportunities. For some students, even surpassing the basic eligibility hurdle in order to be considered for admission at a selective institution represents a major achievement. … Contrary to the perception of some in the general public, employing an applicant's ability to overcome educational obstacles as a selection criterion is not simply a means to correct past inequities … Students who demonstrate the ability to rise above their early lives' social and economic limitations are likely to face future hurdles with the same determination and perseverance. (p. 34)

Develop an "Economic Affirmative Action" Program for College Admissions

Top-tier and other selective colleges should develop an economic affirmative-action program to increase the access of low-income students to their classrooms. The resulting increased access of these students to more-selective schools would not necessarily diminish the academic quality of the schools. As noted by Carnevale and Rose (2003),

> There are large numbers of students from families with low incomes and low levels of parental education who are academically prepared for bachelor degree attainment, even in the most selective colleges. Their numbers are far greater than whose who currently attend. (p. 38)

Expand the Criteria Used to Rank Colleges and Universities

Some of the most heavily weighted criteria used by *U.S. News & World Report* and others that rank colleges and universities promote the admission of White, upper-class students, for these are the students who score higher on the SAT, contribute more money to the alma mater, and are more likely to make early decisions regarding which college they will attend ("How some colleges improve," 2002). Ratings would more accurately measure institutional quality if they were expanded to include factors such as the involvement of faculty as mentors; the academic gains (e.g., course content and life-skills) accrued by students during their undergraduate careers; and the graduation rates of (a) the general student-body, (b) groups of students with different ranges of SAT or ACT (American College Test) scores, and (c) students having different

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demographic histories (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status).

Focus on Adding Value to Students

Most selective colleges base their admissions decisions on relatively narrow definitions of "merit" (e.g., high SAT scores) that add value to the college (i.e., improve the ranking of the college). This, in turn, has greatly skewed access to these schools by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. To improve the access of these students to top-tier schools (and the socioeconomic advantages that these schools offer), admissions officers should focus more on the value added by the college to the student than on the value added by the student to the college. Although such an emphasis would "turn the traditional admissions model on its head" (Carnevale & Rose, 2003, p. 23), it would decrease the educational and economic stratification in the U.S. society.

Potential for Underprepared Students

In the right environment, many underprepared students "catch up" with their classmates, indicating that something in their prior educational experience (rather than an individual trait per se) may account for their academic difficulties. Moreover, there is little, if any, evidence that at-risk students cannot learn, that they have radically different "learning styles" from other students, or that they must be segregated from other students to learn. On the contrary, at-risk students often perform even *worse* if they are isolated from other students in separate classes and separate schools (Astin, 2000; Oakes & Quartz, 1995; Rossman, Astin, Astin, & El-Khawas, 1975). Some developmental education programs, especially those that avoid describing students with potentially debilitating labels such as "remedial" and "deficient" and seek to develop the "whole student," significantly improve at-risk students' chances for success (Moore, 2002; Pedelty, 2001).

Many professors enjoy teaching valedictorians, National Merit Scholars, and other "best and brightest" students. However, educators should not delude themselves into thinking that they always have a significant impact on these students' academic futures. The Village Idiot could teach these students; they are going to succeed academically regardless of their academic experience. A bigger and much more important challenge is to teach the students who might *not* succeed, that is, the underprepared, at-risk students who, for whatever reason, do not believe that they can make it. Many of these students can succeed in the most selective schools, yet they believe that college is "not for them." Such perceptions often cause nontraditional students to abandon their dreams because they believe that college is an insurmountable barrier to success. These students aren't viewed by most professors or admissions officers as being the best students. They're students who are the first in their family to attend college, students who attended a substandard school, and students who had to work to support themselves and their family and therefore didn't have too much time to study. They're underprepared students who believe that they can't succeed. They can; that's why they deserve the best teachers academe has to offer.

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10-12, 2004–North Carolina Community College Instructors' Conference, "The Wheels of Learning," at the Koury Convention Center in Greensboro, NC. For more information, contact Shanna Chastain at 336.334.4822 ext. 2794 or chastains@gtcc.cc.nc.us.

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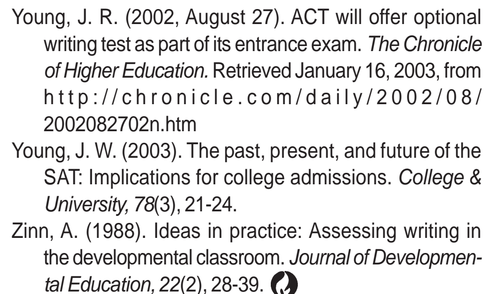

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