The Day I Turned Stupid

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On January 25, 1997, I turned 41. On August 22, 1997, I turned stupid. I dropped 23 IQ points in one morning, made a slow recovery in the afternoon, only to close down 31 points at the end of the day. I have been unable, despite sustained and heroic efforts in the intervening months, to return to my previous historic high.

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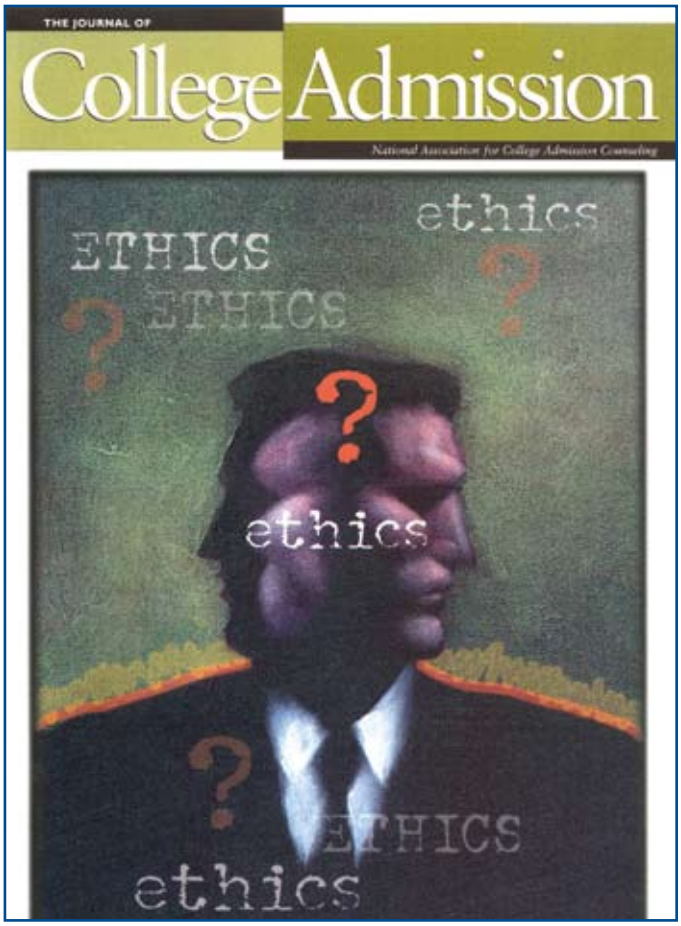

I wish I could blame some covert government conspiracy and call agent Fox Mulder and Dana Scully to investigate. The truth, however, is not "out there." It is right here.

On August 20, I was associate director of undergraduate admission at Duke University (NC). On August 22, I became director on college placement at the South Carolina Governor's School for Science and Mathematics. Mark Twain once said that when he was 18 he thought his father was impossibly stupid. By the time he was 25, he thought his father was the smartest person alive. He could not believe how much that old man learned in just seven years. I am suffering the same syndrome as Twain's father, but in reverse. I know now that this affliction is as rampant among college placement professional as the common cold.

When I worked at Duke, parents from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires—wealthy, notable persons—frequently called me to ask complex philosophical, socioeconomic, statistical-historical questions about the college application process. These questions usually began with an emphatic **if**.

"**If**," a parent would ask, "a bassoon playing line-backer with 1320 on the SAT from an Arkansas magnet school applies, **but** he couldn't get Algebra II because his block schedule limited his options **and** this same bassoon playing linebacker is **furthermore** the nephew of a Duke law school alum and a National Merit

BE JOYFUL:
My students will never know much of what I do for them. But I'll know. And watching one of them dance across the lawn outside my office waving an acceptance letter or scholarship award from her dream college, despite my stupidity, is good enough for me.

Semi-Finalist (breathe) what are his chances of being admitted Early Decision?"

My answers were resolute, thoughtful and measured. And the callers seemed to listen with care and gratitude. I was often invited to high school seminars around the country to speak to crowds of anxious parents and their overwrought children about the best way to prepare for the college application process. In return for my insight, they lavished me with letters of praise (please, forget for a moment the obvious conflict of interest):

"You absolutely 'wowed' them!"

"Your detailed, yet concise and well-organized presentation was every parent's dream of what she wanted someone else to tell her child."

"You were terrific!"

Those were the salad days. I published two articles and was quoted in *Money Magazine*. I walked with my shoulders back and my head high. And when an opportunity presented itself, I jumped at the chance to use my detailed knowledge of the college application process in a more communal setting. In August, I cheerfully packed up my accumulated wisdom and headed off to a residential high school for gifted math and science students. I was hungry to captain them across the storm-tossed seas of college admission. But a funny thing happened on the way from Durham, North Carolina to Hartsville, South Carolina.

Perhaps there was a hole in my briefcase. Of maybe the hole was in my head.

Either way, most of my expertise leaked out before I could stem the flow. And, oh how the mighty are fallen!

When talented students whom I wish to bequeath my years of experience come to see me, something peculiar happens. The extremely bright young people speak to me very, very carefully, as though afraid I might not understand. I think a compound fear is keeping them from asking me anything too complex. First, an incorrect answer from me might ruin their chances of getting into a top school or receiving a scholarship. Second, I am convinced they think an intricate question would reduce me to a drooling mess rocking inconsolably in the corner, the fingers of one hand crammed in my mouth, the other hand rapidly patting the side of my head.

As she held up two fingers, a student from Denmark (South Carolina, that is, it's right down the road a piece from Norway) asked, "Does… Duke… require… the… SAT… twwoooo?"

"Yes it does," I replied, my shoulders sagging.

"Are… you… sure?" She added simple hand gestures to be sure I understood.

"Yes. They require the writing tests and any two others of your choosing. Unless you are applying to engineering, in which case one of the two remaining must be a math test." After such a fluent answer, my confidence felt restored.

She peered deep into my eyes like a referee examining a bloody boxer who has just risen from the canvas after taking a brutal left hook to the chin. "Maybe," she muttered, "I oughta have my dad call their admission office."

She ran off as I shouted, **"**Did I mention that I used to work at Duke**?!"**

Those letters of praise sit yellowing on my bookshelf. *Money Magazine* never calls. Invitations to comfort the discomforted multitude no longer come. My calendar is empty on dates when it used to be filled with speaking engagements. Now, I must seek the support of "experts" (which I no longer am!) to talk to my kids about college admission.

Only last night, I made a new acquaintance. When he discovered that I was the director of college placement at The Governor's School for Science and Mathematics, he pinched his eyebrows together and asked, "Is that enough to keep you busy eight hours in a day?" Because he was a lawyer, I was tempted to snatch his briefs into a wedgie. Instead, I replied with a mongrel cross between a smile and a grimace, "No, but please don't tell my boss."

I'm worried. If I have become this stupid in four months, how stupid will I be in seven years? Please, console me if you see me. A simple pat on the back and a reassuring, "it'll be okay," will do. But, don't go too out of your way or worry much about me. This is still the best job I've ever had.

My charges will never be aware of the most important labors I perform for them. Much of what I know must be kept secret in order to maintain the integrity of the process. Besides, they don't need to know about the night I spend hooked over my desk staring at the rough draft of a recommendation, begging my pen for perfection while waiting for the muse to speak. Even if I tried to explain them, it wouldn't matter. Have you ever heard a student declare that she got into Harvard because of the recommendation her counselors wrote? As we all know, she got in because of the attention-grabbing essay she penned with the aid of a clever little guidebook about how to seize the mind of a jaded and overworked admission officer.

Maybe, to borrow Houseman's phrase, I will "swell the routs of lads who wore their honors out." There are no honors for sliding out of a warm bed late at night to jot down a vivid phrase for a spirited letter of recommendation. The are no honors for haranguing my former colleague in admission offices around the country with phone calls praising these wonderful kids with whom I now live and work.

No honors, perhaps. But no less honorable. My students will never know much of what I do for them. But I'll know. And watching one of them dance across the lawn outside my office waving an acceptance letter or scholarship award from her dream college, despite my stupidity, is good enough for me.