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Higher Education and Civic Responsibility

Alexander W. Astin

It goes without saying that higher education plays a major part in shaping civic life in modern American society. Our colleges and universities not only educate each new generation of leaders in government, business, science, law, medicine, the clergy, and other advanced professions, but are also responsible for setting the standards and training the personnel who will educate the entire citizenry at the precollegiate level. Higher education institutions can also exert important societal influences through the scientific, technological, and cultural knowledge produced by their faculties. (Reprinted with permission by the author.)

Even though the United States is generally regarded as having the finest postsecondary education system in the world, there is mounting evidence the quality of civic life and engagement in this country has been eroding in recent years. The list of problems is a long one: shaky race relations, growing economic disparities and inequities, excessive materialism, decaying inner cities, a deteriorating infrastructure, a weakening public school system, an irresponsible mass media, declining civic engagement, and the increasing ineffectiveness of government, to name just a few. In a democracy, of course, citizen disengagement from politics and governmental ineffectiveness not only go hand in hand, but also cripple our capacity to deal constructively with most of the other problems.

If higher education is indeed such a central player in the shaping of civic life in America, then one might reasonably ask, where have we gone wrong? That our system has the capacity, not to mention the responsibility, to begin focusing more of its energy and resources on such problems is reflected in a number of recent developments, including the rapid growth of the Campus Compact (which now numbers nearly 600 member institutions that have pledged themselves to promote engagement in public and community service), the involvement of the American Association for Higher Education in a major effort to encourage service learning across the disciplines, and the recent commitment by the American Council on Education to undertake a “national initiative on higher education and civic responsibility.” This international conference can be viewed as one more reflection of this growing movement.

“Civic responsibility,” however, is not something that higher education simply defines for itself and then attempts to meet through appropriate programs and policies. On the contrary, what constitutes our civic responsibility is something that is constantly being defined and redefined jointly by our institutions and the larger society. Sometimes the impetus for redefinition comes from the federal government, as was the case with the Land Grant acts of 1862 and 1890, the G. I. Bill that came on the heels of World War II, and the various student financial aid programs initiated in the 1960s and 1970s. At other times the impetus comes from the states, as, for example, when they undertook a massive expansion of public higher education beginning in the late 1950s and initiated their own student aid programs in the 1960s. At still other times the institutions themselves redefine their mission, as was the case when most colleges and universities abandoned their in loco parentis responsibilities during the 1960s and early 1970s.

This growing interest in service and civic engagement within the higher education community is also being encouraged and supported by public and private agencies outside of academe. An increasing number of philanthropic foundations, for example, together with the Corporation for National Service, are currently supporting a variety of institutional efforts to promote service learning and to stimulate greater institutional engagement in public and community service. At the same time, several states are currently considering legislation designed to accomplish similar objectives.

Despite these promising developments both inside and outside of academe, the American system of higher education still has a very long way to go before it can claim to be genuinely committed to the task of renewing and revitalizing civic engagement and democracy in the United States. In the classroom, faculty continue to emphasize the acquisition of knowledge in the traditional disciplinary fields and the development of writing, quantitative, and critical thinking skills, giving relatively little attention to the development of those personal qualities that are crucial to civic life and effective democratic self-government: self-understanding, listening skills, leadership, empathy, honesty, generosity, and the ability to work collaboratively. One seldom hears mention of “civic responsibility” or “citizenship” in faculty discussions of curricular reform, even though such concepts are frequently found in the catalogues and mission statements of colleges and universities. And while there have been some very promising developments in the curricular area — an increased emphasis on issues such as multiculturalism and the environment, for example — the general education programs in most institutions are still notably lacking in requirements that focus directly on issues of contemporary American civic life and democracy: the central role of information and the mass media, the possible causes of declining civic engagement and declining trust in government, the escalating role of money in politics, the growing corporate influence, and so on.

And despite the mounting evidence that student engagement in community service substantially enhances the undergraduate experience, service learning remains pretty much of a marginal activity on most campuses. (Perhaps the best measure of how far we still have to go in the area of service learning is the fact that we continue to regard institutions like Portland State University and...
Hampshire College as unusual and unique because they have been able to institutionalize the ethic and practice of service.) Finally, in our hiring, tenuring, and other personnel practices, collegiality and service to the institution and to the community continue to receive little, if any, weight.

What I am really suggesting here is that a genuine commitment on the part of our higher education system to renewing civic life and civic engagement in American society will require that we be willing to embrace significant changes in our curricula, teaching practices, reward system, and community relations and, most importantly, in our institutional values and beliefs.

The Central Role of Values and Beliefs
I would argue that the essence of any organization or community of individuals is the shared beliefs of its members. This is true not only of colleges and universities, but also of churches, political parties, social clubs, unions, professional societies, and community organizations of all kinds. Even with organizations that are ostensibly based on physical or geographic factors such as race, gender, or national origin, shared beliefs is the "glue" that holds such organizations together and gives them meaning.

What shared beliefs and values would we be likely to find if we were able to look inside the heads of faculty colleagues in any academic department of a typical college or university? What are the purposes or aims about which they would be most likely to agree and which would therefore shape their day-to-day behavior and collective departmental decision making? While there would certainly be many areas where faculty colleagues differ in their beliefs, there are certain beliefs about which we would find a great deal of consensus. Consider the following faculty belief statements, prefacing each with "We agree that we should..."

- Garner more FTEs (faculty positions) from the administration.
- Get the administration to give us as much money as possible in our annual budget.
- Minimize teaching "loads" (without jeopardizing funding from the administration).
- Maintain as much autonomy as possible in the conduct of departmental affairs.
- Enhance our department's/institution's reputation in the community/nationally.
- Recruit the best possible students ("best" meaning those with the highest GPAs, the highest test scores, and the strongest recommendations).

This last value would be hard to implement in most community colleges and other nonselective institutions, although there is good reason to believe that most faculty in such institutions wish they could implement it: a recent national survey of teaching faculty (Sax et al, 1996) reveals that only 35.5 percent of community college faculty nationwide are satisfied with the "quality" of their students. This is by far the lowest figure of all institutional types. If our hypothetical faculty colleagues were working in a research university, we could add the following values to the list:

- Publish as much as possible.
- Enhance the department's/institution's reputation as reflected in national rankings (faculty recruitment, publishing, and fundraising being the primary means).

There are, of course, many other beliefs and values that would be shared by at least some faculty in all types of institutions—being an effective teacher and mentor for students, serving the institution, being a good colleague, serving the community—but the six values in the first list would be shared by most departmental colleagues in most types of colleges and universities. Indeed, to question any of these beliefs in the presence of departmental colleagues would be considered odd, if not a sign of derangement. And while the four beliefs in the second list would be most characteristic of faculty in research universities, many faculty in the larger state colleges and in many selective private colleges would share them as well.

The point to keep in mind is this: these beliefs exert tremendous influence in higher education because they (a) are shared by most faculty (b) are easy to articulate, and (c) translate readily into practice. There are, to be sure, certain other beliefs—intellectual honesty and academic freedom, for example—to which most faculty also subscribe, but these beliefs are more abstract and have little effect on day-to-day educational practice and decision making. Perhaps most importantly, they are not usually seen as competing with the values in the two lists. And while it is true that values such as good teaching and good colleagueship frequently come into conflict with some of the beliefs listed above, these other values tend to lose out because they are (a) not embraced by all faculty and (b) not so easily translated into practice: What is "good" teaching, anyway? And what is "good" colleagueship?

If we were to ask faculty to justify or rationalize the beliefs in the lists above, we would be likely to get two kinds of answers, which I like to characterize as the "excellence" and the "survival" arguments, respectively. The excellence argument states that the academic excellence of our department and of our college or university depends on having lots of resources and the autonomy to deploy these resources as we see fit. The necessary resources include bright students, lots of money, and—in the research-oriented institutions—exceptional faculty who are at the cutting edge of their fields. This "resources" argument would seem to account for most of the beliefs in both lists except the ones having to do with reputation, but these beliefs really have to do with the importance of having our "excellence" validated by the outside community. Excellence, in other words, is manifest in two ways: the resources that we acquire and the reputation that we enjoy in the eyes of others.

The "survival" argument is based on the realization that most other departments in Our own institution, and most departments in competing institutions, are operating according to the same set of beliefs. Since there is a finite pool of resources in our institution, finite pools of outside public and private funding for higher education, and a finite pool of well-prepared students, and since everybody else is competing with our department and our institution for the largest possible share of these resources, we also have to compete in order to "survive." It's a dog-eat-dog world, and only the fittest—meaning those who can be truest to these beliefs—will be able to survive. In the research oriented institutions, this
competitive zero-sum game is further intensified by the competition for top scholars and research dollars. Interestingly enough, the reputational ratings game is also seen in the same zero-sum way: competing departments or institutions are able to move up in the rankings, then someone else (us?) must be displaced. In other words, the competitive juices that get mobilized by these beliefs are focused both on resource acquisition and reputational enhancement.

An obvious problem with believing that the “excellence” of our institutions is defined primarily by our resources and reputation is that such a definition fails to address directly our basic societal purposes of teaching and public service. We focus more on enrolling top students than on educating them well. (Even in the open-door institutions, we tend to look at the student — any student — primarily as a means of resource enhancement.) We focus more on enhancing our reputation in the eyes of the community than on serving that community. Not that we don’t need reputations or resources in order to teach and serve, but rather that a unidimensional focus on resource acquisition and reputation building as ends in themselves can ultimately cause us to neglect our basic educational and service missions (Astin, 1985). (Paradoxically, it can also cause us in the research-oriented institutions to neglect our research mission, because we become focused more on acquiring top scholars and researchers than on developing the scholarly talents of the incumbent faculty.) In other words, if our primary business is, as we claim in our catalogues and mission statements, to develop talent, why shouldn’t we also judge our excellence in talent development terms?

The roots of many of our seemingly most intractable problems can be found in this preoccupation with resource acquisition and reputational enhancement: the valuing of research over teaching, the struggle between equity and excellence, and the lack of community that we find on many campuses. We value research more than teaching because we believe that outstanding scientists and scholars will add more to our reputation and resources than will outstanding teachers or mentors. And when we define our excellence in terms of the test scores of our entering freshmen — the high-scoring student being viewed here as a “resource” that enhances our reputation — we set our sense of excellence in direct conflict with our desire to promote educational opportunities for those groups in our society whose test scores put them at a competitive disadvantage. Finally, when we focus on reducing teaching loads and acquiring more faculty FTEs, or when we place the highest value on the individual scholarly accomplishments and national reputations of our faculty, we reinforce our faculty’s competitive and individualistic tendencies, making it very difficult for them to develop those qualities that help to promote a sense of community on the campus: good colleagueship, collaboration, sharing, community service, citizenship, and social responsibility. These latter qualities, of course, are the same ones that are needed to make any democracy work. Clearly, we can’t expect our students to develop the personal qualities required for effective citizenship if we don’t model some of those same qualities in our own professional conduct. Our students are going to be influenced at least as much by what we academics do as by what we say in our mission statements and classroom lectures.

Educating the Underprepared Student

As I consider all of the ways in which our traditional beliefs about excellence and survival interfere with our ability to improve and strengthen civic life in American society, no problem strikes me as being more important than the education of the so-called underprepared or “remedial” student. By examining this issue in some depth, we can begin to see how it might be possible for higher education institutions to become more effective agents of positive social change.

I want to emphasize that my principal interest here is higher education’s larger responsibility to serve and strengthen democracy and civic life in America, and that there are many other issues that I could focus on: the absence of any real emphasis on citizenship in the curriculum, the lack of community on the campus, the importance of expanding service learning, the need to reform teacher training and to develop better connections with the K-12 level, financial stresses, and so on. Rather than treating each of these other problems in a superficial way I have chosen instead to examine one problem in some depth. In this way, I think we can gain a better understanding of the deeper value issues and institutional dynamics that need to be addressed before we can deal more effectively with any of these “civic responsibility” issues.

Let me begin by asserting what may seem like a radical proposition: the education of the so-called “remedial” student is the most important educational problem in America today, more important than educational funding, affirmative action, vouchers, merit pay, teacher education, financial aid, curriculum reform, and the rest. I would also like to propose that providing effective “remedial” education would do more to alleviate our most serious social and economic problems than almost any other action we could take. Finally, I would argue that we academics will not be able to make much progress in strengthening “remedial” education unless we are also willing to reexamine our traditional beliefs about excellence and survival.

The first two propositions are based on the realization that, if we fail to develop more effective means for educating “remedial” students, we will find it difficult to make much headway in resolving some of our most pressing social and economic problems: unemployment, crime, welfare, health care, racial tensions, the maldistribution of wealth, and citizen disengagement from the political process. I say this in part because: (1) underprepared students have historically been the ones most likely to drop out at any level of education; and (2) persons with relatively low levels of educational attainment account for a disproportionate number of welfare recipients, prison inmates, poor people, the unemployed, and people who don’t vote. Beyond this, the issues of race relations and affirmative action are intimately connected to the issue of underpreparation, since we have created a competitive, hierarchical, higher education system which dispenses privilege on the basis of measures — the GPA and standardized test scores — that put our two largest racial minority groups at a competitive disadvantage. If our higher education system allocated its resources more equitably across different socioeconomic and racial groups, there would be little need for affirmative action in admissions.

Why Do We Shun Remedial Education?

It goes without saying that the underprepared student is a kind of
we likewise avoid standardized tests, which are often seen as unglamorous, unimportant, and irrelevant to many institutions — demeaning.

What is a "Remedial" Student? Before proceeding any further in this discussion I would like to add a word of clarification about terminology. The "remedial student" and "remedial education" are basically social constructions that have strong negative connotations. Just as in medicine one gives a "remedy" to cure an illness, so in education there must be something "wrong" with the student who needs to be remedied. But there are at least three other aspects of the "remedial" concept that are misleading, if not downright erroneous. First is the use of categorical terminology to describe a phenomenon that is relativistic and arbitrary. Most remedial students turn out to be simply those who have the lowest scores on some sort of normative measurement — standardized tests, school grades, and the like. But where we draw the line is completely arbitrary: lowest quarter, lowest fifth, lowest 5 percent, or what? Nobody knows. Second, the "norms" that define a "low" score are highly variable from one setting to another. Let me quote one academic administrator's comments about his less-well-prepared students: "Some [students] ...arrive seriously underprepared in English, foreign languages, history, or mathematics, and not infrequently in all those subjects... resulting in a diversion of effort into essentially remedial learning" (Ford, 1984, p. 32). This happens to be a former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, and he is speaking here, of course, about Harvard undergraduates. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the problem with the concept of the remedial student is that there is little, if any, evidence to support the argument that these students are somehow "incapable" of learning, that they have markedly different "learning styles" from other students, that they require some radically different type of pedagogy, or that they need to be segregated from other students in order to learn. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the lowest-performing students perform less well if they are segregated from other students in separate classes and separate schools.

The Individual and the Institution One of the ideas that has intrigued me over the years is the frequent parallel that I find between what happens on the individual level and what we do at the institutional level. Just as individual citizens have responsibilities as well as rights, so do academic institutions. And just as excessive materialism and narcissism can interfere with the individual's ability to be a good citizen, so can an academic institution's preoccupation with acquisitiveness and self-aggrandizement interfere with its ability to be a "good citizen" in the community of institutions and in the larger society.

No problem in higher education, it seems to me, provides a better metaphor for understanding what ails our academic institutions and, indeed, our society, than does the underprepared student. Just as our preoccupation with materialism, individualism, and competitiveness makes it difficult for us to be responsible citizens who work cooperatively for the collective good of all citizens (especially the least advantaged ones), so does higher education's preoccupation at the institutional level with resource acquisition and reputational enhancement make it difficult to appreciate the critical importance of effectively educating all students, and especially those who are underprepared.

Let's examine this individual-institutional analogy in a bit more depth. Just as most individuals will behave civilly and humanely toward those poorer or less well-educated people they happen to encounter in their daily lives, so are most colleges and universities willing to provide at least some special help for those few underprepared students they happen to admit. The problem is simply this: being "nice" to that handful of less advantaged fellow citizens who happen to cross our paths doesn't begin to solve the larger social and human-problems of poverty, welfare, desperation, and lack of hope, for two very basic reasons. First, these people may well need much more than a friendly smile or a handout — a job (or a better job), for example, or more education, a better place to live, a sense of purpose, and some optimism about their futures. And second, since most of us have managed to isolate ourselves physically from our less advantaged fellow citizens, most of them have little or no contact with us. Similarly, in higher education we manage to avoid contact with most underprepared students through selective admissions, by tracking them into community colleges, by hiring outsiders to teach them, and by continuing to support grading and norm-based testing practices in the lower schools that almost guarantee that large proportions of them will be discouraged from even considering further education beyond high school. And recent studies (Astin, Tsui, and Avalos, 1996) suggest that being successful even with those few underprepared students who have managed to gain admission to our more selective institutions may require a
Being "Smart"

Why do underprepared students make us so uncomfortable? Is it just that they are more difficult to teach and that their presence on campus threatens our sense of excellence, or are there deeper reasons? While our beliefs about the importance of resource acquisition and reputational enhancement are consciously acknowledged by most academics, there are other, closely related beliefs that are more "hidden," even though they can have profound effects on how we view the issue of remediation and underprepared students. One such belief, which is virtually never acknowledged, much less examined critically within academe, is what I like to call "the importance of being smart." There are many other terms, of course, that we could use brilliance, creativity, intelligence, and so on but for the purposes of this discussion I will use the term "smartness." My many years as a scholar of higher education and as an employee of a research university convinces me that much of our fear of remedial students and much of our unwillingness to get involved in educating them can be traced to our uncritical acceptance of this belief and to the fact that most of us are not even consciously aware of the power and scope of its influence (Astin, 1997).

I believe that our uncritical and largely unconscious adherence to being smart and to being seen by others as smart distorts academic life, corrupts the academic review process, and stifles innovation in higher education. But let us first consider how it influences the way we approach the underprepared student.

Most of us clearly favor our brightest students, not only in admissions and the award of financial aid, but also in the classroom. If bright students enroll at our institution and if they take our classes, then this reflects well on our own brightness: surely we must be smart if our students are so smart! But if our students are not so smart, then this reflects poorly on us. This may help to explain why so many academics keep such a close eye on the average test scores of their entering freshmen: if our students are getting smarter, then we are reassured about our own smartness; but if they are getting dumber, our sense of our own smartness is threatened. No wonder we hire others to teach such students or simply avoid them altogether through the use of selective admissions.

The real problem here is that we value being smart much more than we do developing smartness. In our relentless and largely unconscious preoccupation with being smart we forget that our institutions' primary mission is to develop students' intellectual capacities, not merely to select and certify those students whose intellectual talents are already well developed by the time they reach us. This preoccupation with being smart is also part of the reason why we continue to support a grading system and a standardized testing industry that are geared to ranking and rating students rather than to reflecting how much they are actually learning. These assessment devices may be useful in identifying the "smartest" and "dumbest" students, but they imply a very narrow standard of "smartness" and are of little value either in helping students to learn or in helping us to evaluate the success of our pedagogical efforts. We have inflicted this same "normative" system of testing on the lower schools, such that politicians and the public now assess the "quality" of schools simply on the basis of which ones have the "smartest" students, rather than in terms of which ones are the most effective educationally. The truly insidious feature of normative assessment at the precollegetate level is that it sends powerful negative messages to the (relatively) lower-performing student: you're dumb, you're lazy, you're not "college material," you're a loser. No wonder so many young people lose interest in education before they ever reach college age.

Our belief in the importance of being smart also has as many other subtle and distorting influences on our collegial relationships. Like any other professionals, we academics identify with and seek approval from our peers, and the manner in which we go about obtaining this approval is heavily influenced by the shared values that help to define our academic culture. We thus want to appear smart to our academic colleagues, and we have devised a variety of strategies for doing this. The surest way to gain peer recognition of our intellectual capabilities, of course, is through published research and scholarship, which no doubt helps to explain the inordinate weight we give to publishing, not only in the academic personnel process but also in graduate training.

In our more personal relationships with colleagues we employ a variety of strategies to make ourselves appear "smart." Some of us seize on every opportunity to demonstrate our intelligence or brilliance in the presence of peers, and very often this strategy manifests itself in committee, departmental, or academic senate meetings. Indeed, one could argue that such faculty assemblies provide a kind of theater where our more assertive faculty can demonstrate their critical thinking skills in the presence of colleagues. Such faculty, and the various performance venues that we provide for them, can pose serious obstacles to educational reform efforts. Thus, if someone were to present a well-thought-out plan for, say, expanding service learning, we can be sure one or more colleagues will rise to expound at length on all of its "defects." Since reform in higher education is what this conference is all about, and since faculty support and participation will ultimately be the key to the success of any proposed reform, it is worth looking at these faculty dynamics in a little greater depth.

Criticism, of course, is central to problem solving and other forms of intellectual work, but in the hands of a sufficiently articulate faculty critic it becomes an end in itself— the virtuoso performance— thereby precluding any deep engagement with the problem at hand. Such faculty are especially skilled at exploiting their more passive colleagues' insecurities about being smart, for example, by suggesting that any change in policy or practice will compromise "academic standards.

At the same time, many other faculty are concerned less with demonstrating their intellectual prowess than with minimizing the possibility that they might be regarded as "not too bright" by their colleagues. Such faculty are easily intimidated by their more assertive colleagues, generally remaining quiet in faculty meetings and passively "going along" with the negativity of the critics. Reformers who might want to suggest change, in the meantime, are placed at a considerable disadvantage in these debates, since attacking a new idea offers a much more tempting opportunity to demonstrate your brilliance in critical thinking than does defending the same idea. Even if the reformers are themselves articulate spokespersons on behalf of their proposals for change,
they are usually fighting a losing battle. The implicit collaboration between the professional critics and their passive or indifferent colleagues thus makes it very difficult to give any reform proposal a fair hearing, simply because the critics are usually able to keep attention focused on the "defects" by exploiting their more passive colleagues' fears about "appearing dumb" and failing to "maintain academic standards." These faculty dynamics exert an especially pernicious influence on those faculty members who might otherwise support reform, since they often become demoralized or even cynical: "It's impossible to get anything changed around here." Such beliefs, of course, ultimately become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Our preoccupation with being smart also corrupts the peer review process. If critical colleagues think a candidate is not smart enough, or are simply out to "get" someone they happen not to like, their verbal and written critiques can be absolutely devastating to the candidate's chances (not to mention self-esteem and morale). Academic research and scholarship, especially in the humanities and social sciences, is highly vulnerable to attack from a sufficiently determined critic, regardless of the quality of the work.

But knowing that colleagues attach so much importance to being smart can also cause us to err in the other direction: When we "like" a colleague who is up for review, we are inclined to pull our punches in criticizing that colleague's work, lest our criticism be interpreted by others as evidence that the colleague is not "smart enough." Even when we react to a colleague's work outside of the formal review process, we often temper our criticism so as to avoid "hurting" the colleague's feelings. In short, the enormous value we assign to being smart breeds a great deal of inauthenticity in the peer review process, whereby some colleagues are subjected to undeserved and humiliating attacks, while others are deprived of needed critical feedback that could ultimately improve their scholarship.

Institutional selectivity, of course, is intimately tied into our obsession with being smart. Universities, and selective institutions in particular, are very much like private clubs, where instead of money, power, or social status, intelligence and intellectual achievement — "smartness" — becomes the yardstick by which prospective members are judged. In the culture of academia, simply being admitted to or employed by a selective institution is a mark of individual smartness. If you have any doubts about this, consider that your institutional pedigree follows you around for the rest of your life. In much the same way that people living under a monarchy routinely judge each other's qualities in terms of their bloodlines, so are educated people in the United States inclined to judge the quality of others on the basis of where they attended college. Even senior academics with long records of professional accomplishments are typically introduced to audiences by first reciting their academic pedigrees.

This discussion highlights still another problem that stems from our preoccupation with institutional selectivity: using a simplistic yardstick like an SAT or ACT score or the selectivity of one's institution as the principal indicator of that person's ability or smartness not only distorts and misrepresents the wonderful diversity of abilities and talents of our students and ourselves, but implicitly diminishes the great social and cultural importance of "citizenship" talents such as empathy, self-understanding, honesty, responsibility, and the ability to work collaboratively.

Creating a Real Higher Education Community

While American colleges and universities can be justifiably proud of their diversity and autonomy, a collection of 3,400 institutions simply "doing their individual things" does not make for a coherent or effective system. The problem is not that we are all so wonderfully individual and diverse, but rather that the sum total of our individual uncoordinated efforts doesn't always add up to a meaningful whole. We each have become so preoccupied with our individual "excellence" — raising as much money as possible, recruiting the "best" students and faculty that we can, and promoting our institution's reputation — that we tend to lose sight of the fact that we are really part of a much larger community of institutions that is collectively supposed to serve a very basic and critical public purpose: to educate the citizenry. Unless we can sit down together and collectively begin to discuss our "systems" responsibilities to the larger society, our efforts to become "excellent" as individual institutions will continue to thwart our efforts to achieve real educational "excellence" as a system.

Nowhere is this tension between individual and community needs better illustrated than in the case of the lower-performing or remedial student. Among institutions that have more applicants than available places — and this includes most of the baccalaureate granting colleges — nobody really wants these students. Since each institution aspires to greater excellence by recruiting the best-prepared students that it can, the underprepared students become pariahs to be avoided and shunned, not only because their presence on the campus detracts from our personal and institutional sense of "excellence," but also because they are regarded as difficult and expensive to teach. Such a policy might make sense from the myopic perspective of an individual institution that is striving for "excellence" in conventional terms, but it makes no sense from the perspective of an educational system that is trying to educate the entire citizenry. If underprepared students are shunned by most institutions because they threaten their sense of academic excellence, how can we ever hope to give any real priority to educating them?

In short, we need to realize that the significance of the underpreparation problem for each state's higher education system — not to mention its national economic and social significance — can hardly be overestimated. And, as I have already suggested, how effectively we deal with underpreparation has obvious relevance not only to retention and program completion, but also to enrollments, to transfer, to the status of underrepresented minorities, to the inner cities and the poor, to crime and welfare, to economic development, and to the overall condition of our community and our democracy. Rather than seeing the underprepared student as a burden or as a threat to our excellence, we need to understand that we and the society and our democracy have an enormous stake in what happens to these students. In other words, the presence of the underprepared students in our institutions represents a tremendous opportunity for each of us to make a contribution to the welfare of the society and the quality of civic life. If nothing else, an extended interinstitutional conversation about this issue at the system level would make it clear that all of us in higher education — not to mention the rest of the society — have a heavy stake in finding and implementing the most effective ways of educating the underprepared student. And it will not be enough simply to talk about this issue. We also need to take action.
The Systems Approach

Again, the only way to deal effectively with this or any other "systems" issue is to start acting like we are indeed a system. At the state and local level, we must sit down together — all types of institutions — and begin a serious discussion of our mutual ambivalence about remediation. These interinstitutional conversations could also cover a number of other related issues — coordination and expansion of community service and service-learning programs, community needs, local environmental problems, diversity and multiculturalism, sharing of resources, admissions, transfer of credits, etc. — but the one that cries out most urgently for attention is the underprepared or remedial student.

If we see fit to initiate a "systems level" discussion of underpreparation, it will soon become obvious that all types of institutions must share some of the responsibility for meeting this challenge, much like the agreement that insurance companies in most states have reached to share part of the responsibility for insuring "high risk" drivers. It will also become obvious that the secondary school people should be invited to join in the conversation, and that we higher education folk must eventually form much closer partnerships with the lower schools in the interests of enhancing the quality of precollege education. But what about the poorly prepared students we now admit? While there are many excellent remedial or "developmental" programs already in place in institutions of all types, the hard data on results remain discouraging: overall dropout rates, especially in the community colleges and state colleges, are still unacceptably high if not scandalous, and research shows that poor preparation — and all that goes with it — is one of the prime identifiable causes of the problem. For example, among full-time freshmen entering baccalaureate institutions, the six-year degree completion rate for the least-well-prepared students (those with C averages from high school and SATs below 850) is only 20 percent, compared to better than 80 percent among the best-prepared students (those with A averages and SATs above 1,300). It is thus not surprising to find that the low six-year degree completion rates for African Americans (31 percent) and Latinos (38 percent) are entirely attributable to their relatively poor academic preparation (Astin, Tsui, and Avalos, 1996). Are such results acceptable? Isn't it about time for the community of higher education to begin to take collective action to change these figures?

Why "Going it Alone" is so Difficult

The necessity for us to move away from our purely individualistic mindset — what's best for my college or university? — and to adopt more of a collaborative or consortial approach to the underpreparation problem becomes clearer when we consider what might happen if an institution were to try to "go it alone." As long as colleges and universities continue to operate independently and to persist in their traditional beliefs about excellence, any institution automatically puts its "excellence" at risk if it unilaterally chooses either to admit substantially greater numbers of underprepared students or to invest substantially more resources in educating such students. One possible consequence of such a change in policy would be that the institution's main constituencies — its alumni, donors, and prospective students, together with their parents, teachers and counselors — will begin to believe that the institution is "slipping" or "in decline" because it is "lowering its standards." These constituents, after all, subscribe to the same traditional beliefs about excellence. And as the word about the changed admission policies begins to spread, the institution could well start to experience a decline in applications. This is a real problem that cannot be easily dismissed, and it underscores, once again, the need for institutions to address the underpreparation problem collaboratively.

Defending Selective Admissions and Tracking

If we could be successful in stimulating the kinds of "systems" discussions that I am envisioning, the conversation would soon begin to focus on the various arguments that we traditionally use to defend selective admissions. For example, a frequently used defense is the "prediction" argument: we select those students with the highest grades and test scores because these measures "predict" performance in college. While such an argument would make sense in employment — we hire "the best" in order to exploit their talents for the benefit of our company — it makes little sense in education. Even if students learned absolutely nothing in college, prior grades and admissions test scores would still "predict performance" in college (in fact, they would probably predict even better!). I sometimes like to say that selective admissions is, in certain respects, the process where we admit only those students who already know what we're supposed to teach them. This would be the equivalent of saying that a hospital or a clinic should refuse to admit or treat the sickest patients because their condition "predicts" a poorer outcome than would be the case with patients with less serious illnesses. Just as medical treatment should strive to change an otherwise negative outcome through effective care and treatment, so should colleges and universities strive to change the "prognosis" for the underprepared student through effective educational programs.

Selectivity in admissions is also frequently rationalized on educational grounds: the brightest students, according to this argument, need to be around other bright students in order to realize their maximum potential. This is, in effect, the "center of excellence" argument, where the best students and the best faculty and the greatest resources are concentrated in one place. A closely-related argument is to use selective admissions to insure academic "standards." The rationale here seems to be that we guarantee "high standards" at the exit point by having "high standards" at the entry point. While there is no necessary reason why admissions standards should dictate graduation standards (Astin, 1998), it is true that, if the institution utterly fails in its educational efforts with students, then graduation standards will indeed be determined by admissions standards!

While there may be something to be said for the center of excellence concept at the level of an individual institution, this concept poses serious problems when it is viewed from a systems perspective: What civic interest is served by concentrating the least well-prepared students and the least resources in a separate set of institutions? How can such an arrangement be rationalized in terms of the larger interest of the community and the society? The fact of the matter is that it can't. To see why this is so, we can again use an analogy from medicine. For example, in designing a total health care system for our community, how much sense does it make to (a) refuse to treat the sickest patients, (b) establish a large number of underequipped and
underfunded facilities for moderately ill patients, and (c) create a much smaller number of elite facilities with the finest and most advanced equipment and best-trained and highest-paid staff which would admit only people with common colds?

A Key Role for Students
In taking more of a "systems" approach to the problem of underpreparation it is important to keep in mind that our greatest untapped resource may be the students themselves. There is probably no other group better suited to tutoring underprepared students than their better-prepared peers. If such peer tutoring could be built into the curriculum in a systematic fashion, everyone would benefit: more pedagogical resources would be created to deal with underpreparation, the better prepared students would have an opportunity to master course material in greater depth by teaching it to others, and the overall sense of a collaborative democratic community within the institution would be greatly strengthened. If such a tutoring program were expanded to include a variety of service learning opportunities for student tutors to work with underprepared students in the public schools, the bonds between the higher education institutions and the local community would also be strengthened.

Other Benefits of Collaboration
This interinstitutional "systems" conversations being advocated here would hopefully help to dispel some of the myths about underpreparation: for example, that such students are simply incapable of learning, or that the problem is a problem only for certain types of institutions (a high percentage of freshman at the University of California, for example, are required to take remedial English). It would also address some of the core issues that individual institutions will not, or simply cannot, address on their own: How are different types of institutions going to divide up the responsibility for teaching underprepared students? Is it educationally sound — in terms of the larger systems interest of effectively educating underprepared students — simply to track most of them into community colleges, which have the most limited educational resources? Have not the public universities already developed some expertise in this area, for example, through their special programs for athletes? Are there structural changes — such as making each community college a part of a university — that would help to bring more educational resources to bear on this problem? What can university research tell us about innovative approaches — such as cooperative learning and peer tutoring — that might be especially effective with underprepared students? Can some of the university’s educational and social science research capability be focused more directly on assessing the impact of various approaches to remediation? Institutions of all types have already experimented with literally dozens of different types of programs, and it is a shame that so little systematic evaluation has been done so that all institutions could begin using the most effective approaches.

A major unanswered question that still needs much more study and analysis is the efficacy of various approaches to educating underprepared students: what works best, with which type of student, and under what conditions? It may well turn out that the most effective approaches are quite expensive, but this should not deter us from seeking the relevant knowledge. My own sense about the cost issue is that public resistance to increased educational spending is often based on these very same concerns about efficacy: Will our tax dollars really buy anything? Will the money really produce any results? If we could produce solid evidence documenting the efficacy of certain approaches to educating underprepared students, public resistance to greater spending would almost certainly diminish, especially in light of the enormous social and economic costs that would be associated with not doing an effective job with these students.

Here again we can see the potential power of interinstitutional collaboration. Consider for a moment the opportunities for comprehensive research and analysis that could grow from an extended collaborative discussion involving institutions and systems of institutions at all levels. When one realizes that there are literally hundreds of "developmental" programs of all types and perhaps hundreds of individual courses being offered in our larger states, the possibilities for collaborative research are remarkable. Rather than isolated, one-shot studies where one course or one approach is studied in isolation, the large number and great diversity of programs would allow us to examine simultaneously the effects of many different approaches. Even if only a fraction of the institutions and programs in a state were to be studied simultaneously, the large numbers would still make it possible to design very sophisticated and comprehensive studies. This interinstitutional collaboration would also facilitate the development of excellent training programs for those who teach underprepared students.

What I am suggesting here, of course, is that research on programs for underprepared students and preparation of faculty to teach such students should be a collaborative effort carried out at the systems level. In this way, the different approaches taken in different institutions can be viewed as a grand "natural experiment," where evaluators in the various institutional settings work together to identify the most effective educational strategies for the system.

In short, these interinstitutional conversations would hopefully be successful in leading the participants to agree on the following:

Developing effective programs for lower-performing students at all levels of education is of vital importance not only to our educational system, but also to the state and the society at large.

Finding and implementing more effective programs for underprepared students is a "systems" challenge that must be accepted and shared by all institutions at all levels of education.

Substantially more resources must be invested in collaborative efforts to experiment with alternative approaches to remediation and to implement large-scale collaborative studies of different approaches.

Possibilities for Action
The real question, I suppose, is how to effect this change from an individualistic to a community or systems mentality. I’m not sure that I or any of us really knows. I sometimes have fantasies that Harvard will someday soon call together all of the postsecondary institutions in the Boston area and just say, "let’s do it." The fantasy continues: UC Berkeley, not to be outdone, calls Stanford and all the other Bay Area campuses together and says, "let’s do it." And the other prestigious flagship universities — Michigan, UCLA, Wisconsin, Texas, Washington, and the rest — follow suit. Fantasy or not, one thing seems certain: if Harvard and Berkeley
see fit to start something like this, it will soon "trickle down" to the rest of us. And even if the movement were to be started instead by a major state university system like the University of California, flagship universities in other states would be much more likely to consider it. In other words, if institutions at the top of the pecking order see fit to deviate from the sacred cow of selectivity, this in effect "gives permission" to the rest of us to do it.

It is always possible, of course, that the institutions that currently enroll most of the underprepared students will come to realize that they don't really need permission from the more elite institutions to give greater priority to educating the underprepared student. Current political trends, however, seem to be headed in the opposite direction: major public college systems such as the City University of New York and the California State University are talking about "phasing out" remedial education. One major problem, of course, is that many of the faculty in these institutions support these initiatives because they see the mere presence of underprepared students as thwarting their ambitions to attain greater "academic excellence." If the more elite public and private institutions continue to stand passively on the sidelines, these wrong-headed, antidemocratic, and self-destructive efforts to dump the underprepared completely out of the public college system may well succeed.

Another possible scenario would involve an initiative from state government. What if the legislature of a large state like New York, California, or Texas were to establish an incentive funding program which would, in effect, put a bounty on each underprepared student? Current political trends, however, seem to be headed in the opposite direction: major public college systems such as the City University of New York and the California State University are talking about "phasing out" remedial education. One major problem, of course, is that many of the faculty in these institutions support these initiatives because they see the mere presence of underprepared students as thwarting their ambitions to attain greater "academic excellence." If the more elite public and private institutions continue to stand passively on the sidelines, these wrong-headed, antidemocratic, and self-destructive efforts to dump the underprepared completely out of the public college system may well succeed.

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Still another possibility would be grassroots efforts, possibly encouraged or sponsored regional consortia or by national associations like the American Council on Education, where groups of similar institutions would jointly agree to substantially expand and upgrade their programs for underprepared students.

**Some Concluding Thoughts**

The problem that plagues our contemporary democracy is in many respects the same problem that de Tocqueville (1945) identified more than a 150 years ago: the tension between individualism and community. This tension is exacerbated by the mistaken belief that we are independent of and separate from each other. Even our most recent research on students highlights the importance of community: the single most important source of influence on the individual student turns out to be the peer group (Astin 1993). We associate freedom with individualism, and democracy with community, but the two are really inseparable: we create our own democracy and our government through our individual beliefs and actions, while at the same time the condition and quality of our community and democracy define what kind of individual freedoms and what kind of life we enjoy. The real question is what kind of community and democracy we want to have.

In certain respects our preoccupation with enhancing resources and reputations and being smart is simply a reflection of our changing society, which during the past few decades has increasingly come to celebrate the values of materialism, competitiveness, and individualism. While it goes without saying that social institutions often mirror the values of the larger society, higher education's continuing adherence to these values represents a major obstacle in its efforts not only to deal with the problem of underpreparation, but also to enhance civic engagement and civic life and to promote the cause of educational and social equity in the larger society.

In closing, I'd like once again to return to the question of values and beliefs. The initial challenge for us at this point is not so much to change our traditional beliefs, but simply to become more conscious of these beliefs and of the role they play in our professional lives. It is one thing to embrace beliefs that do no serve us well, but quite another to be largely unaware of these beliefs or of the extent to which they affect our policies and actions. I believe that an open inquiry into our most deeply felt beliefs will show, for example, that our preoccupation acquiring resources, enhancing our institutional reputations, and being smart and being seen by others as smart has affected practically everything we do, and that many of these effects are contrary not only to our own best interests as academics, but also to the educational mission of our institutions. My use of the term "contrary" is by no means meant to suggest that intelligence and intellectual skills should not be central to the values that govern academic life. Rather, what we need to begin is a serious discussion of the extent to which we have come to worship merely being smart, as opposed to the value of developing smartness. Since this latter value is what excellent teaching and excellent education are all about, this discussion will almost certainly serve us well, not only in our efforts to effect meaningful reforms in our approach to educating underprepared students and fostering civic responsibility in all of our students, but also in our desire to lead more authentic and productive lives as academics. 

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**Book Review**

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Perhaps it may be too soon to declare these relatively young programs successes, for as Amy Driscoll of Portland State University comments, "It is not a finished story. There is potential for both successes and failures ahead. There are untried approaches and unforeseen problems in the process, and there are both certain and uncertain outcomes." (p. 151) However, they do represent strong forces in the movement toward community connected teaching and learning. The programs described in this book should help those of us in higher education — faculty, administrators, and student leaders — understand the diverse focuses and formulations of service-learning programs, as well as how they can be fully embraced academically.

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