



The Degradation of Merit

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There will be controversy and dissent in the allocation of rewards when rewards are scarce and the criteria for distributing them are unclear. This is a problem of “distributive justice.” More people believe they are eligible for the reward than there are rewards to go around. There are, at face, two solutions: make the rewards more numerous or make the criteria clearer. The problem with the first solution is that there is a point when the rewards are made so numerous as to no longer constitute a reward. The problem with the second solution is that all definitions involve boundaries, and in drawing boundaries some subset will believe they have been unreasonably excluded. There are other, less straightforward, solutions. They extend from the first solution above by effectively reducing demand for the said reward. One is to make the substance of the reward clearer, and by doing so, enlighten those who seek it that in fact they would be better matched for some other reward. Another is to improve the value of alternative rewards.

A slab of meat placed on a table around which sit more persons than the meat can sensibly serve will prompt conflict when all comers believe they are ready to eat. Should another slab of meat be added. Or how is it determined who shall eat this particular meat? I shall argue in this short essay that it should be offered to those who succeed in demonstrating to the host, with respect to delineated criteria that are functionally relevant to the occasion, that they are most hungry and will make the most of the meal by having it in their system. I am not persuaded, as are some others, that *all* of the many people who have come to the table are equally hungry, or that *most* of those who

are turned away are just as suited as those who enter *this particular* feast. Hungers vary in kind and intensity; they can be addressed at varied octanes. A portion may not be particularly hungry at all; they show up because it's the thing to do—many people are doing it—or simply out of habitual eating—a kind of unthinking auto-pilot. No goods, but especially not precious ones, should be wasted on gluttons or the slovenly—they can go to another table (or better yet watch from the side). The meats elsewhere may be thought to vary in quality, but the quality is largely dependent on how the goods are prepared and served, and in how the wants and expectations are conditioned in those partaking of them. These are legitimate problems for hosts and comers alike to take up. Hosts should be masters at their craft and deliver quality wherever they work. Comers need to know that they, too, are expected to deliver; it is not about *consumption*, but on what one will *produce* from opportunity. Still, whichever the table, it's meat, and there is in actuality plenty to go around.

Some have suggested that we “solve” this dilemma by effectively replacing scarcity with ubiquity—college for all! This is de facto what “massification”—the movement in higher education from elite, to mass, to universal higher education—has accomplished during the second half of the twentieth century in the U.S and throughout the Western world, a point to which I will return. But then the rewards are not a reward so much as they are an entitlement. (Exercise: Ask students in a college course whether they believe college attendance is a right or a privilege.)

In sectors that are selective, individuals and groups vie for the rewards, in part by arguing and campaigning that certain characteristics qualify them for the goods. This is not at odds with the tournament. People compete; when the competition is keen, new and sometimes irrelevant criteria for consideration enter the round, as does corruption. We are of an historical period in need of rectifying merit. This is a recurring challenge to merit. Present problems with what shall actually constitute

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merit, specifically in education institutions, are indeed nothing new in general form. They are as old as merit itself, as Joseph Kett's (2013) history of the idea of merit makes clear. At the same time, Robert Merton (1968) explained that when institutionalized means cannot satisfy culturally desired goals, people (and institutions) "innovate": they utilize illegitimate means to secure the end.

This is what happened in the college admissions debacle of 2019 wherein illegal financial means were utilized to get the reward. But by whom? Stories of individuals, especially when they are celebrities, may be more titillating for a public than those of faceless organizations. It is not only parents seeking coveted placement in the educational elite for their children who "innovate," but also institutions who seek coveted resources on which their operating budgets increasingly depend. Both individual and organizational actors are corrupt. Commentators on the event have noted with no shortage of irony that legal means, which likewise involve money to secure the end, have been used freely in college admissions. This fact returns us to *what is merit* and how it is, or should be, operationalized in American higher education.

Massification and Institutions

In a prescient essay, relevant today as when it was published in 1974, Martin Trow observed that in every advanced society, the problems of higher education (including those here of admissions) inhere in growth. The forms and functions of higher education, in systems and in individual institutions, change with expansion. Trow set forth a developmental theory wherein as student enrollments increased, institutions and systems evolved from elite to mass and then to universal higher education. As growth occurs, the character of institutions morph, evident in such arenas as attitudes toward access, curriculum and forms of instruction, the perceived function of higher education, rhythm of the student "career," academic standards, and governance structures. Moreover, as institutions increase in size, so do their demands upon the polity, prompting a question about the proper relationship between the state and higher education, manifest no more clearly than in the amount of funding a state shall provide in support of its so-conceived public institutions. What is more,

The rising rate of enrollment of an age grade has another important significance, one not so directly political. As more students from an age cohort go to college or university each year, the meaning of college attendance changes—first from being a privilege to being a right, and then, as is increasingly true in the United States, to being something close to an obligation. This shift in the meaning and significance of attendance in the tertiary

sector has enormous consequences for student motivation, and thus also for the curriculum and for the intellectual climate of these institutions (Trow [1974] 2010, 92).

College comes to have increasingly varied meanings for students. Varied understandings of college presents an organizational challenge that entails substantial consequences for students, faculty, and institutional life. Principal among these is securing a match between the aims of institutions and the instructional goals of faculty on the one hand and the wants of individuals selected to attend those institutions on the other. (Exercise: Ask a group of faculty members what college is for. Then ask a group of college students.) The aims of education have always constituted one of the great philosophical subjects of human society. But the voices of the classic debates—Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and many more—pre-date the historical development we have come to call massification. Massification has magnified and extrapolated a confusion. Modern-day scholars and dedicated educators have labored to reconcile where we are now, as evident in Andrew Delbanco's 2012 book, *College: What it was, is, and should be*, and Johann Neem's, *What's the point of college?* (2019). In not uncertain terms, the sociologist Christian Smith lamented the matter in his 2018 essay, "Higher Education is Drowning in BS." Trow made the point that "the old institutions," by which we may infer as consisting in the United States of especially the elite private universities and colleges, "cannot expand indefinitely; they are limited by their traditions, organizations, functions, and finance" (Trow [1974] 2010, 93). Virtually all of these institutions did indeed expand over the last half of the twentieth century, and in particular in the decades buffeting the turn into the twenty-first century.

Some, however, disagree with the point. An illustration is Frederick Hess' concluding remark:

If you're worried that the prestigious schools wouldn't be able to serve all the talented applicants they'd like, I get it. So, here's a solution: The colleges can expand. They can double their size, or even admit everyone who'd like to go. That might further dilute their manicured prestige, upend carefully cultivated cultures, force them to spend endowment dollars to buy land and erect buildings, require the hiring of many new faculty, and so much more. It'd be really inconvenient. But such is life. (Hess 2019).

Similarly, Christopher Newfield (2019) has argued: "What will work is growing the system so there are enough really good seats for all the perfect transcripts, and the other

transcripts as well. The point would be to replace selectivity with scale...”

This solution is self-defeating; it is thus not a solution. Elite institutions are not antithetical to expansion but they are to large-scale massification. It is a basic contradiction in terms. Elite institutions cannot be expanded ad infinitum and still be elite. Replacing scarcity with ubiquity renders less valuable that which was scarce. When we do this, the “thing” becomes something else, and that something else is not what many students and their parents have allegedly come to crave. That “thing” can already be had elsewhere. It may be the case that some of these institutions are in a position to expand more than they have to-date, but in most and perhaps all cases it is not “doubling their size.” That defeats their purpose and de facto what many students (and their parents) seek at such places.

“Carefully cultivated cultures,” if we take seriously the idea of culture, are arguably the best reason to attend an institution that has one, so long as a student is well-matched for it. We may explain the relative cost of private higher education in the United States by the cultural effects those institutions have on students. By cultural effects, I refer not to projected income or occupation, but rather to a way of life in which organizational culture has conditioned one to become continually intellectually and aesthetically cultivated. The aim is to “shape mind and character and not merely to transmit information and theories or to form skills. It is concerned as much with the acquisition of ways of thinking and feeling, not least about oneself in relation to the world, as it is about the knowledge acquired” (Trow [1976] 2010, 147)—the active, inquiring, beautiful life.¹

This is set in contrast to education that endeavors to transpire in a bureaucracy, where relationships between students and professors are segmented from course to course, “silo” to “silo,” or even non-existent, and where technical and vocational concerns replace liberal and general education. (Exercise: Ask students at a large university if they know even the names of the professors they had the previous term.) The cultural effects of the former tend to be strong, and the strength of the effects is afforded by institutional size. One might argue that the cultural effects of the large, public institutions, for instance, are also substantial. They are. Loyal alumni are an indication of an effect. But the effects may be substantial in ways that have little to do with liberal learning and education, that is, with intellectual and aesthetic cultivation. This may be partially indicated, for instance, by the proportions of alumni who donate monies in support of athletic teams and foundations over the institution itself, signifying how individuals assign importance to the institution and which, for the place as for the self, allows “the party” to live on. The point recalls

George Herbert Mead (1934) on how institutions shape the mind through the language of a culture.

In today’s environment, institutions can charge a high premium for relative smallness, not only because it takes considerable resources to operate as small but also because many other places have become the contrary in the massified age. The benefits to students are arguably great. (Exercise: Ask students at a large university how the institution attempts to “offset the effects of size.” And ask them why the institution tries to do this.) Is a student’s engagement and learning more likely in a class of 25 or 300? What pedagogies and instructional exercises will be used in those two courses, and what will be impracticable? What are the best institutional conditions under which one is rehearsed to learn how to read, think, speak, and write, to receive meaningful feedback on one’s efforts, and to be held accountable for one’s education? In short, what will be accomplished by going to college? The “honors colleges” that have proliferated at large public universities seek (ironically?) to carefully cultivate their own culture, protect a distinct identity, and honor privileges of membership. Why? Shouldn’t all students at such an institution, because they’ve been admitted to the institution, enjoy the benefits that come with small size? Apparently institutional size matters. It is not a matter of inconvenience, as Hess puts it, but rather one of educational philosophy and purpose.

Newfield (2019) seeks support of his platform by invoking a populist point that “[m]ost people are pissed at institutions that were to make society fairer and now do the opposite.” To this we may ask: when was this ever true? It may be part of a mandate and mission of state institutions, but not necessarily private ones. With perhaps only few exceptions, private institutions have never sought to level the playing field as part of their mandate and mission. Providing an avenue to upward mobility for the middle classes has not historically been consonant with elite institutions of the United States. Furthermore, I am doubtful that we could find evidence in support of any of their obligation to do so. With the exception of UCLA and Texas, six private universities were involved in the latest admissions controversy. It is also private institutions, not public ones, where what Newfield calls “legal bribery” cloaked as philanthropy is most an issue in parents lobbying to gain admission for their children.

This does not excuse that practice. It is a mistake that belies an understanding of institutions’ organization and purpose, however, to assume or assert that institutions are, or should be, all of one kind. An egalitarian position will always be “highly critical of any tendency to institutionalize differences between one sector and another of higher education. Egalitarians in many countries are committed to closing the gulf between the several parts of their higher educational systems, and to reducing the differentials in the status, quality, costs, and amenities of its different segments and institutions” (Trow [1974] 2010, 122). This, though, simply makes the

¹ From the website of economist Caroline Hoxby (at Stanford).

problems of ubiquity return. We eliminate the thing people are desiring. The statement also assumes that *difference* means *less* of something—less status, quality, cost, and amenities.

Differences between public and private, between institutions' missions and mandates, encompasses the subject of selectivity of higher education institutions. Selectivity nestles discussion and debate about admissions. Reading about the controversy, one might be tempted to conclude erroneously that it affects the core of American higher education. There are approximately 4,500 institutions of higher education in the U.S. (of which about 1,000 are two-year community colleges). These institutions enroll nearly twenty-one million students. As discussed above, enrollment in U.S. higher education grew dramatically across the twentieth century. U.S. higher education became a "high participation system," that is, a system enrolling more than 50 % of students after they leave secondary school, in the 1940s and 1950s—the first country in the world to do so, but no longer exceptional in this regard (Cantwell 2018). High participation systems of higher education now characterize virtually all of Western Europe, Russia, Japan, Australia and are extending presently into Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Latin America (Marginson 2018). Still, only China, whose population is about three times the size of the U.S., has today a greater total higher education enrollment (Cantwell 2018). Approximately 70 % of institutions in the U.S. are public, 20 % not-for-profit private, and 10 % in the for-profit sector (Cantwell 2018). Taking all of these institutions, the vast majority are not selective. Selectivity characterizes but a small fraction of higher education institutions in the United States. The well-known selective, private universities that command relatively plentiful resources and prestige—Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, Yale, and so on—enroll a tiny portion of all students.

About 1 in 25 students are accepted for admission to Stanford University (Stanford now receives roughly 45,000 applications for a little over 2,000 slots.). When we speak of a "selective" *public* institution, of which there are not many relative to all public institutions, the figures change substantially. At my own institution, for example, which proudly considers itself "selective," roughly 1 in 2 applicants are accepted. (The University of Georgia receives a little over 23,000 applications for a little over 13,000 slots.) It is not the same at UCLA, for instance, where one's chances are about 1 in 6. (UCLA received the most applications in 2018 of any institution in the country. It generally receives about 100,000 applications for a little over 16,000 slots.) But most institutions in the U.S., even the public ones, are not UCAs. Most institutions of higher education in the U.S. are open access. Put differently, merit essentially does not matter (because it need not matter) for most of American higher education, insofar as we have come to accept the terms of massification and what it entails. Massification brings about the diminishment of merit: merit either no longer matters at most institutions or, where it

does, is subject to erosion as increased numbers seek access. That is, merit is used only, and is the object of contestation, under conditions of scarcity.

Thus the "scandal" in admissions and what to do about it speaks to a very small slice of American higher education. While this truth places the controversy in a greater context, it does not make it unimportant or wholly unworthy of consideration. Let us then turn to this very small slice and consider what merit might mean.

The Modern Problems of Merit and their Historical Sources

Merit in U.S. higher education has lost meaning. Insofar as admissions is concerned, this is true because most of American higher education no longer requires merit and because, in the small sector that does, it has become politicized and corrupted to a point of uselessness. If something can be anything, it means nothing. The erosion has occurred to such a degree that it is only vaguely articulable even to those on the inside of higher education institutions. (Exercise: Ask a college admissions official, a student, a professor, and a college president to define merit.) *Merit is established by demonstrated performance.* Performances establish merit for specific contexts; there is a functional relation between the performances and the group that requires evidence of merit. Variation in performance establishes gradations of merit. *Potential* can be inferred on the basis of performance, but one must perform, and perform well, in accordance with criteria relevant to the group requiring evidence of merit, in order to be meritorious.

As I will explore, there are essentially three problems that handicap the operation of merit specifically in U.S. higher education admissions. These problems come from two main sources. I will explain that the degradation of merit is a problem that education has largely brought on itself. It has done so by how it has adapted to a neoliberal socio-political environment that took strong root in the 1980s and intensified thereafter. To this end, I treat merit as an organizational problem of higher education that inheres in how colleges and universities are situated in their environment. Merit has lost meaning because institutions have adapted to their environment in a way that leaves merit untethered from standards and thus open to claims that it can be constituted by multitudinous criteria.

The three problems that compromise the operation of merit and render it meaningless in higher education admissions are these: grade inflation, exaggerated letters, and mis-match. High school grades and letters of recommendation from high school faculty have long served as principal means by which to provide testimony about the merit of applicants to college. Institutionally, grades are intended as markers of students' educational achievement. Letters provide direct, first-hand

observations of a student's demonstrated performance and potential as well as testimony about a candidate's demonstrated characteristics that are relevant to the group or organization to which an applicant seeks admission. If these means are corrupted, then so, too, is merit, because merit is decoupled from the standards by which it is adjudicated.

First, grades. On the inside of U.S. colleges and universities, there is evidence to indicate strongly that there is widespread grade inflation in contemporary collegiate education (Hunt 2008; Johnson 2003; Milton et al. 1986). Grade inflation is measured by an increase in grades over time without an increase in student performance (Goldman 1985; Hu 2005; Rosovsky and Hartley 2002). Grade inflation has escalated over time; historically, it is presently at an all-time high (Rojstaczer and Healy 2012). Forty-three percent of grades awarded across U.S. colleges and universities are A's (Rojstaczer and Healy 2012). At public institutions, 73% of grades are A's and B's; at private institutions, 86% (Rojstaczer and Healy 2012). Currently, D's and F's total less than 10% of all letter grades (Rojstaczer and Healy 2012). The average GPA at public schools is 3.0, at private ones, 3.3 (Rojstaczer and Healy 2010). In 1960, as in the 1940s and 1950s, C was the most common grade nationwide; D's and F's accounted for more grades combined than did A's (Rojstaczer and Healy 2012). Stuart Rojstaczer has stated: "The bottom line is that grading nearly everywhere is easy. After 50 plus years of grade inflation across the country, A is the most popular grade in most departments in most every college and university" (2016, 6).

There is indication that grade inflation afflicts high schools. A major study concluded, "there's no debate that grade inflation exists" (Gershenson 2018, 25). High school grade inflation has been measured in part by significant discrepancies between students' grades and their scores on standardized tests. Studies have found that significant numbers of students who earned high grades failed to demonstrate mastery or even proficiency on exams (Gershenson 2018). Evidence from state-level data indicate that the median grade of high school students is a B (Wright 2019).

As one observer put it, "The harm done by lowered expectations doesn't just befall the kids who are barely making it through high school... a disservice is being done to their high-achieving peers... those who leave high school at the top of their class and under the impression that they're fully ready for college, including elite schools..." (Wright 2019). Anecdotal evidence further signals a problem. As part of an exposé conducted by the *Boston Globe* on graduates of the city's high schools, students were asked to comment on their college preparation. A student at Bryn Mawr College concluded: "Being valedictorian, it didn't mean anything. I didn't understand anything I read [at college]. I didn't know how to write. I felt like I was disabled in this elite environment" (Wright 2019). And from a student who attended Boston University:

"I felt like I wasn't prepared to be there"; and from a valedictorian now at Northeastern University: "I was massively unprepared" (Wright 2019).

Second, letters of recommendation have become useless. They are flagrantly and grotesquely dishonest. They exaggerate the merits of the subject through distortion, concealment, and invention. Teachers, advisors, coaches, friends, acquaintances, and even family members, freely lie about the candidate. The letter of recommendation has become its own genre, most akin to obituaries. The result is a simulacrum of academic life. Everything is fake, a charade, there is no substance, no "real" reality—or so how the texture of institutional life feels in the absence of merit. The situation with letters appears as true for college and graduate students and faculty promotion reviews as for college applicants. Some may not have lost their candor completely. "...[T]he recommendation letters turned from real appraisals of strengths and weaknesses to symphonies of superlatives that ought to make their authors ashamed of themselves. I don't know when the letters began to be watered down, but they are today completely worthless" (Abbott n.d.).

Third, mis-match is an additional problem hampering merit. I refer to incongruity between students, involving both applicants and matriculants, and the institution they attend. Massification has brought about the problem in which unqualified students apply to a given school, including elite schools, and some of them end up matriculating. Mis-match is facilitated by a fetishization of rankings. Rankings, particularly those promulgated by *U.S. News*, measure nothing having to do with higher learning or what actually happens to students in a given college, but they are key source to which students turn for what many likely take as useful information. Vertical classification is thought to correspond to quality. (What if we classified institutions horizontally?) Commensuration is not a idea understood by many minds (Espeland and Stevens 1998, 2008; also Espeland and Sauder 2007). Like stardom, highly-ranked schools and programs incite fantasy. People imagine themselves (or their sons and daughters) at a place and beneficiaries of the alleged rewards that are thought to flow automatically to graduates. This explains why Stanford garners more applicants than the University of Georgia, even though it is very likely that most of those applicants are better suited for a place such as the University of Georgia. Rankings help to sustain the simulacrum.

Many college students do not belong in college. Some do not belong at the particular type of institution they attend. How they have gotten to where they are is a matter of merit. College decision-making processes are also nestled in high school guidance operations, peer networks, and socioeconomic backgrounds that condition perceptions of college opportunity (see, for example, McDonough 1997). Further, the explanation may involve money, both that has been and will be given by the students and their families and an institution's

financial needs. But it also likely involves the degradation of merit—specious grades and fallacious letters. That massification coincides with an evolution in cultural values wherein higher education is increasingly viewed as obligatory does not mean that all of those obliging the value are capable of college. This is also to say that the dilemma of college admissions is smaller still than meets the eye, beyond taking into account the slice of institutions it involves. Such institutions may be selective, but a *hyper-selectivity* consists of numerous cases of mis-match. Significant numbers should not even be applying.

Problems in admissions posed by scale can be addressed by better matching. Addressing the problem involves endowing college application and matriculation processes with more information about institutions that is actually useful for students and parents to possess. The degree of their success is contingent on it. Many students do not know the type of institution in which they are enrolled. And they do not know what that means for them. (Exercise: Ask a class of students what type of institution they are at. Ask if they know what is, for example, a liberal arts college, a research university, or a comprehensive university.) Selectivity is often treated as a noun. Institutions apply criteria, and selectivity comes into existence. In the interests of merit it likely operates best as a verb. Students and institutions need more valuable information about one another which they may more rationally use to pair up.

The sources of these problems are twofold. As I have explained, the last—mis-match—comes from massification. Massification carries the belief that people should go to college. In the absence of good information about why one should go to college and which type of institution to attend, institutions are flooded with detritus. Significant proportions are unmeritorious for college or for particular types of colleges. A lottery admissions system does not correct for these errors.

I speculate that the source of the first two problems—inflated grades and exaggerated letters—extend most directly from neoliberalism. Central to neoliberalism is the idea that markets guide social life. Neoliberalism is a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade...” (Harvey 2005, 2). “Academic capitalism” has ascended in the higher education lexicon and refers to market and market-like behaviors in universities and among faculty (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). It is argued to give way to a “corporatization of higher education,” in which actors, institutional and individual, are market oriented (Slaughter and Leslie 2001). A social-institutional environment consists of macro level trends wherein neoliberalism enables academic capitalism to flourish with its

attendant effects in privatization and marketization. I have argued elsewhere that the effect of neoliberalism on organizational culture entails a “valorization of shiny things,” that is, a valuing of market-related phenomena over knowledge of its own accord (Hermanowicz 2016). Inflated grades and exaggerated letters shine brightly; actual learning and educational achievement remain in question.

The imagery of neoliberalism centers on a capacity for it to extend profane market behaviors into sacred social arenas that had otherwise been thought “safe” from them; that is, subject to regulation on behalf of a public good. Neoliberalism arguably extends to primary and secondary education. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argued that universities increasingly engage students as “consumers” in which “the college experience” is marketed as a time in “attractive places in which to live, consume services, and play [rather] than as challenging places in which to learn and become educated” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, 298). Likewise arguing that students have adopted a market orientation to college and to course-taking, Mary Grigsby (2009) contends that an attitude of earning a degree with as little effort as possible has emerged.

Comfort is the central experience that arises from decoding a culture in which students see themselves *and are treated as* consumers. The central cultural code that faculty discern in teaching at the contemporary American university is quietly: *not too difficult*. Students do expect quality, but don’t make them work too hard. *Getting-by*, by doing the minimal amount of work for the greatest possible reward, is the contemporary student’s modus operandi. I suggest this culture infiltrates American education at all levels.

High grades and extraordinary letters are consequences of adaptation to this changed environment. High grades provide comfort, average grades discomfort, and low grades outright distress to students. Low grades and honest letters are now a crime. The criminality is indicated by how few people transgress this law; it’s unnormative behavior. A teacher has done something wrong, is perhaps even un-professional, but most decidedly out of order. *Moralism* has developed in education that forbids people from utterances that are difficult for others to hear (Hermanowicz and Hermanowicz *Forthcoming*).

With all crimes there are consequences. I suspect that most faculty of high schools, like most college faculty, do not want outside their offices a line of disgruntled students to whom an explanation must be given about why they are performing poorly. “I’ll leave you alone, if you leave me alone. I won’t make you work too hard (read a lot and write a lot) so that I won’t have to grade as many papers or explain why you are not performing well” (Kuh 2003, 28). Naming a phenomenon that faculty know is widely apparent but undiscussed, researchers refer to the arrangement as a “disengagement compact” (Kuh 2003; see also Arum and Roksa 2011).

Neoliberalism has been called “the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment” because civil discourse

is seen to give way “to the language of commercialization, privatization, and deregulation.” Citizenship, including students and faculty as citizens of schools, amounts to a privatized affair among self-interested individuals. As a result, such observers have reasoned, “the meaning and purpose of... education” is thrown into question (Giroux 2002, 425).

Sentiment toward the goals underlying massification, by turn, has been largely sanguine. While fulsome in his account of the challenges that massification posed, Trow himself held such a view. The optimism is rooted in a democratization of wider society, where growth in higher education entails individual opportunity, greater equality, freer access to social and economic rights, and improved life chances. Combining contemporary currents of neoliberalism and massification, the present account seeks to raise awareness of considerable unintended consequences that these movements entail, singularly and in tandem. In the interests of rational society, in which merit has a chance at meaning, they are forces with which to reckon in the present age.

Whither Merit in College Admissions

If elite institutions are most centrally concerned with intellectual and aesthetic cultivation, then they should admit students, and only those students, whose demonstrated merits are allied with these goals. If colleges and universities seek to be effective organizations, they, like all organizations, need to clarify and articulate their purpose more clearly and disseminate their goals more effectively.

Elite colleges and universities are fundamentally driven by discovery. Their mark is production—the *production of thought*. They arguably seek to develop in students a creative potential. This applies to numerous arenas—the arts, literature, science, leadership—those endeavors that are allied with cultivation of the mind. To eat this particular meat students must demonstrate they are hungry for it. They want it; it is about who they are and seek more to become; and they are the most likely to make the most of it.

To this end, it becomes our task to design better ways to select for such students. This likely involves completely reimagining college applications. The applications need to screen for demonstrated creative intellect and creative potential, for intellectual and aesthetic interests and not simply vocational wants; for intellectual substance; and above all, for the desire to *produce in college*. College is for people who will work hard and as such will bring to college alongside their peers a disciplined capacity to do so. (At the present time I think this alone eliminates a majority of applicants.) Institutions and their faculties want students who will make the most of college as an educational and intellectual endeavor. Let us sort and select them.

The admissions process can be re-formatted by reconceived application forms, delimited requirements for personal essays, and structures of recommendation templates and letters. The aim is to create an admissions structure that is cleansed of dishonesty, misrepresentation, and irrelevant information. It is incumbent on those inside higher education institutions to design these instruments. We in fact do it every semester. Moreover, it is incumbent on institutions to have the staffs to properly evaluate these materials. It is an institution’s moral obligation to handle admissions competently, however large it decides to be, and however much effort it expends to attract voluminous numbers of applications.

Intellect; aesthetics, creativity; discovery; production. Let us note what these criteria explicitly exclude: money, legacy, athletics, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, adversity, geography, and all other functionally irrelevant characteristics. These characteristics will by default be part of the mix. But they are not the performance characteristics on which to select for demonstrated merit. For the meaning of merit to be restored, it requires definition, and that in turn includes and excludes.

We do not address the degradation of merit successfully merely by re-sizing elite institutions. Rather, we do so by cleaning-up merit. It is need of a full wash and a new set of make up. This is part of an ongoing historical project in which merit requires periodic rectification such that it is tethered to something (Kett 2013). Massification and neoliberalism perhaps make the job at this point in history particularly challenging. But people in higher education, who have merit, are smart. Their merit is evidence of ability to accomplish the difficult. It is what they are there to do.

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