ARE YOU SMART ENOUGH?

HOW COLLEGES’ OBSESSION WITH SMARTNESS SHORTCHANGES STUDENTS

ALEXANDER W. ASTIN

AUTHOR OF WHAT MATTERS IN COLLEGE

“Every faculty member, dean, and college president can benefit from reflecting on the message of this book and pondering its implications for the way they go about their work.”—DEREK BOK, President Emeritus, Harvard University
Praise for *Are You Smart Enough?*

“A creative leader and astute observer, Alexander Astin shows how a focus on learning and development can open new vistas of educational opportunity to a questing society. His strategies work. I have seen the evidence in more than 50 years of teaching and leadership in every kind of four-year college and university in America.”

—**J. Herman Blake**, founding provost, Oakes College, University of California, Santa Cruz; and professor emeritus, African American studies, Iowa State University

“In *Are You Smart Enough?*, Alexander (Sandy) Astin offers an eloquent examination of the causes and effects of the emphasis on standardized testing, and its consequence, standardized learning. This book provides a wonderfully thoughtful platform for thinking about what might happen if we found ways to celebrate the differences in the ways that people learn and how we might get there.”

—**Jonathan Lash**, president, Hampshire College

“In this direct and compelling challenge to the profession, Sandy Astin accurately points out that educators devote far more attention to the credentials, readiness, and ‘merit’ of students we admit to college than we do to what actually happens to students’ learning as they progress toward the finish line. Astin calls on educators to not just examine our values and beliefs, but radically amend them.”

—**Carol Geary Schneider**, president, Association of American Colleges and Universities

“Sandy Astin’s body of research and scholarship constitute one of the great intellectual treasures in the study of higher education. His new book reminds us that the development of intellectual talent across the full range of student ability, not just a fixation with the brightest, is what we should be about. It is an important clarion call for American postsecondary education.”

—**Ernest Pascarella**, professor and Mary Louise Petersen Chair of Higher Education, University of Iowa
“This book is ‘must’ reading for higher education faculty members and administrators. I resonate powerfully with Astin’s central tenet that ‘strengthening the education of students at all levels is vital to the welfare of our society.’ Without character development, simply increasing graduates’ smarts will not create the multicultural, globally interdependent democracy we value and need.”

—Arthur W. Chickering, author of Cool Passion: Challenging Higher Education
ARE YOU SMART ENOUGH?
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How Colleges’ Obsession With Smartness Shortchanges Students

Alexander W. Astin
To Lena
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I want to thank Mark Rosin for his helpful comments on the first three chapters. I also want to acknowledge the assistance of my granddaughters, Erin and Amalia, who provided me with some real-life material that illustrated how “smart” students are privileged to be able to utilize community colleges to enhance their educational development. Finally, I want to acknowledge the help of my family—Lena, John, Paul, Jenny, Lisa, Ila, Amalia, and Erin—and several friends who willingly participated in my informal polls to choose the best title and book cover.

Most of the views expressed in this book have been shaped over the years by countless stimulating conversations with friends, relatives, and colleagues. For all of this time, I’ve been blessed to have Lena Astin as my constant companion, playmate, consultant, and beloved spouse. Lena probably tired of hearing me pontificate about American higher education and how it should and could realize its full potential, but she was always there with a sympathetic ear and wise counsel. I began writing this book early in 2014, shortly after Lena was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer, but even when she was not feeling well she was always there to serve as my best consultant and sounding board. During the 20 months of her illness most of the writing
was squeezed in as I was seated beside Lena while she napped in the chemo infusion room or at home in her favorite lounge chair in our family room. When she awoke, I would sometimes share what I had written. Throughout the writing process my brave, sweet Lena always encouraged me to stick with it so I would “have something to do besides worrying about me.” Despite all the chemo and radiation treatments, doctors and hospital visits, and countless pains and discomforts, Lena’s optimism, courage, and spirit enabled her to live a pretty full life until the time of her death in late October 2015, just as the copyediting on the book had been completed. Thank you, my love, for all those years of partnership and colleagueship, and thank you for being you.
America’s universities are the envy of the world. In a recent international poll, 21 of the 30 top-ranked universities (and 7 of the top 10) were American (World University Rankings, 2014). American scientists, working mostly in universities, have been awarded more than a third of all the Nobel Prizes ever awarded (Fisher, 2013). Even more striking, of the 10 universities with the most Nobel Prize laureates on their faculty, 8 are located in the United States (Nobel Laureates by University, 2009).

It comes as no surprise that colleges and universities value the intellect—or what, for the purposes of this book, I have chosen to call smartness. After all, you have to be pretty smart to get into a good college, to earn good grades, to enroll in and complete a doctoral program, or to be awarded a Nobel Prize. Every college or university obviously seeks to enroll the smartest students it can attract and to hire the smartest professors it can find. However, what may not be so obvious—the problem that motivates me to write this book—is that too many of the 1.5 million faculty members who staff our 4,000-plus institutions of higher learning have come to value merely being smart more than developing smartness! Developing students’ talents is, after all, the principal mission of any educational institution—to help students learn, grow, and develop into competent and responsible citizens, parents, employees, and professionals.

This problem has enormous implications for prospective college students and their parents. Parents understandably assume that colleges exist in order to “add value” to their students, not merely to identify and certify the smartest ones. But in most colleges and universities, although faculty may be able tell you who their smartest students are, they usually can’t tell you what their students are actually learning, or how each student is...
growing and developing. This is because their favored assessment methods—course grades and standardized tests—can single out the smartest students but are not very useful in revealing what students are learning and how they are developing over time.

Equating student smartness with standardized test scores like the SAT and the ACT also oversimplifies the remarkable diversity of human talent. Because most colleges and universities are committed to fostering the development of a much richer and broader array of talents, including qualities such as creativity, leadership, critical thinking, citizenship, social responsibility, empathy, and self-understanding, there is no way that smartness can realistically be reduced to a single narrow measure such as a standardized test score.

Parents also need to realize that the pecking order of American colleges and universities clearly favors the smartest students. If your child is not among the 10%–15% with the best school grades and highest standardized test scores, he or she will probably not be admitted to a highly ranked college and will instead have to attend a college that has larger classes, fewer facilities, and less funding. And if applicants are not particularly well prepared for college, they will have to contend with faculty members who would rather be teaching better-prepared students. More parents need to be asking, “Why should an educational system invest the least in students who may need the most in higher education?”

These issues also have important implications for businesses, government agencies, schools, and others who hire college graduates. Colleges and universities were never intended to exist simply to identify the smartest applicants at the time of admissions and hand them credits and degrees four years later on their way out. On the contrary, the quality of our national talent pool depends heavily on how well colleges and universities develop the students’ capacities during the college years. And this means all students.

Our country cannot afford to educate only a select segment of its populace. The United States is rapidly becoming a knowledge-based society. Considering the growing diversity of its people, it is critical that colleges and universities develop the talents and creativity of all their students to prepare them to confront the critical environmental, societal, and economic problems that
lie ahead. In the face of such a challenge, American higher education can no longer simply assume that its students are developing their talents to their fullest potential.

If higher education institutions could begin to monitor student learning in a more systematic fashion, they might well be able to devise more effective methods of teaching and mentoring students at all levels of preparation. Further, if colleges were to broaden their assessments to focus more attention on some of the important qualities not currently reflected in standardized tests and course grades—talents such as creativity, leadership, citizenship, and teamwork skills—the capacity of our colleges to enrich the educated workforce could be substantially strengthened.

Why does higher education assign such importance to simply being smart? And why has it embraced such a narrow definition of smartness? The core functions of almost every college or university—teaching and research—are under the control of the faculty. Faculty decide what kinds of students should be admitted, what to teach them, how they will be taught, and how they will be tested and graded. Faculty choose the topics students will study in their research and the methods they will employ in carrying out that research. Faculty members also play a major role in deciding which new colleagues get hired and which ones get promoted, although administrators often have the final say in such decisions. Many of these administrators, of course, happen to be current or former faculty members.

Like any group of professionals, college professors have their own culture, by which I mean their shared beliefs, the common core values and principles that shape how they conduct their teaching, research, and collegial relationships. Although certain shared beliefs are openly acknowledged (e.g., academic freedom, the search for truth) the central thesis of this book is that one belief in particular tends to exert more influence on academic practices and campus life than any other, even though it is little understood and virtually never acknowledged. I like to refer to this belief as

The importance of “being smart.”