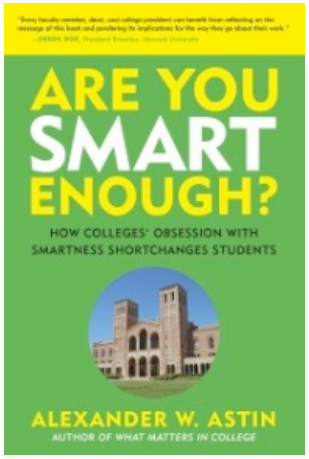


Are You Smart Enough? How Colleges' Obsession with Smartness Shortchanges Students

Astin, Alexander W.
Stylus Publishing, Llc., 2016

Book Review

Tags: civic engagement | higher education | student learning

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“Stop telling your children that they are smart,” is the new rage in parenting advice. Research has demonstrated that praising children for their smartness tends to undermine their performance. Kids who believe that success is due to innate ability also tend to think that failure is caused by innate inability. When they encounter hard tasks, they are prone to give up and to view themselves, or the task, as inept. Nearly every college professor has experienced the frustration of such students, who often feel that their smartness entitles them to automatic A’s on every assignment, regardless of the effort, accuracy, or sophistication of their work!

In *Are You Smart Enough?* veteran educational researcher Alexander W. Astin calls upon college faculty to recognize that our institutions have helped to create this problem. Looking at the primary measures that colleges utilize to evaluate their success – standardized test scores, retention and graduation rates, course grades and GPAs – Astin’s central claim is that postsecondary institutions are more focused upon identifying smartness than developing it. College rankings, for example, are heavily weighted toward the standardized test scores for incoming classes. Course grades and GPAs mainly serve to mark students’ progression toward degree completion, to identify low-performing students who may need to be dismissed, and to aid in admissions for graduate and professional schools. Standard metrics do not assess the information core to colleges’ mission: what students learn and when they acquire the knowledge. Postsecondary education, consequently, has become more concerned with identifying and acquiring smart students than with developing students’ intellectual and academic capabilities.

Astin places much of the responsibility for this preoccupation with smartness upon faculty. While faculty often complain about the culture of entitlement that exists among undergraduate

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and graduate students, we create this culture through our admissions and grading standards, which imply that our job is to reward – rather than enhance – smartness. Many faculty view their jobs primarily as imparters of specialized content knowledge; we expect students to already possess the analytical and communication skills necessary to acquire that knowledge when they enter our classrooms. Astin claims that faculty preoccupation with student smartness is a product of our preoccupation with our own, as evidenced by institutional processes for hiring, tenure, and promotion. Just as colleges expect incoming faculty to be fully formed experts capable of displaying our smartness, faculty expect students to be sufficiently formed when they enter our classrooms.

Astin does not merely critique the institutional culture; he provides concrete guidelines for shifting our focus to growing and developing student learning. In particular, he recommends utilizing narrative evaluations in course grading. He also advocates expanding our assessment of student development to include the affective outcomes that are often central to college mission statements: leadership, citizenship, and service. He writes that colleges should pay particular attention to students' spiritual development, given that a central component of the college experience is students' exploration of their sense of purpose, their moral and ethical commitments, and their self-development.

Astin's text is a significant contribution to the emerging literature critiquing our culture's obsession with innate ability. It explores themes similar to those in Carol Dweck's bestselling book, *Mindset* (Random House, 2006), but unfortunately does so with less substance and more redundancy. It would have been helpful if Astin had integrated evidence from educational and neurological research to support his core assumption that intelligence can be, and should be, developed among young adults. He could also have provided more substantive suggestions for changing academic cultures, with attentiveness to not only admissions and grading, but also to student support services, academic advising, institutional effectiveness, faculty governance, development, and alumni relations.

Overall, *Are You Smart Enough?* is an important and thought-provoking text for postsecondary faculty. While primarily focused upon undergraduate institutions, its central argument is just as relevant to graduate and professional programs.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/are-you-smart-enough-how-colleges-obsession-with-smartness-shortchanges-students/