

Book Review:

College Admissions for the 21st Century

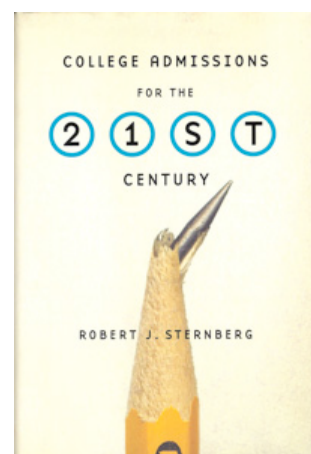
by Robert J. Sternberg

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What are the best criteria for university admissions decisions? This 212-page text seeks to answer that question and demonstrate why current admissions procedures are inadequate for recruiting students with not only good analytical and memory skills, but ample creativity, wisdom, and practical leadership potential as well. The author regards the typical criteria used to accept/reject college applicants - standardized test scores, high school GPAs, class rank, and course profiles - as only moderate barometers of first-year academic performance, and even less reliable as predictors of success in later life.

Despite significant advances in psychology over the last century, Sternberg laments how mainstream college admission procedures have remained fossilized. Why haven't admissions procedures kept pace with evolving psychological insights? One reason Sternberg suggests is the aura of objectivity that psychometric quantitative data possess: by converting complex information about human performance into simple numbers, Sternberg points out how the admissions decisions are sometimes overly simplified. He also describes how economic forces impact college admissions policies: holistic ratings are more expensive and time-consuming than standard ratings.

Those familiar with other works by this author will recognize a number of proverbial themes in this book: in addition to arguing for broader school admission benchmarks, Sternberg emphasizes the importance of aligning teaching and testing practices with entrance criteria. For this reason, this text is relevant not merely to those working in university admissions offices, but to all who seek to promote holistic and humane education.

One of the core concepts in this book is the notion of "successful intelligence." Drawing upon his 1996 work with this title, Sternberg outlines how successful intelligence entails capitalizing on strengths, overcoming (or offsetting) weaknesses, and making optimal choices regarding social environments. The author argues against any single-factor notion of intelligence, suggesting instead that analytical ability, creative ability, and the practical ability to deal with complex social interactions in ethically wise ways are each distinct facets of intelligence. Sternberg maintains that notions of successful intelligence vary across cultures as well as historical eras. As a case in point,

in many Asian societies, intelligence implies interpersonal savvy, not merely a narrow cognitive skills (p. 76).

One idea from this book I have found particularly refreshing is the notion that creativity and practical wisdom are both teachable and testable. Sternberg outlines how to enhance creativity and wisdom-related skills. The core ideas are discussed at length in his 1995 *Defying the crowd: Cultivating creativity in a culture of conformity* and also in his 2000/2007 *Teaching for successful intelligence* (co-authored with Elena Grigorenko).

A good portion of this book outlines Sternberg's attempts to expand the admissions criteria at Yale from 1996-2000 and later at Tufts from 2000-2005. In both cases, he helped develop innovative programs that sought to assess the analytical, practical, and creative abilities of school applicants. The author is somewhat sketchy when it comes to describing those admissions procedures in detail, but he implies that ethnic diversity, social equity, as well as academic performance increased as a result of the measures. Sternberg wisely acknowledges that no clear causality could be demonstrated from his research – there were other innovative interventions going on at both universities that could have “caused” the results. What Sternberg does suggest (unfortunately without enough details for readers to critically evaluate) is a solid correlation between incoming students who reported adjusting well to their school life and their scores according to the expanded rating systems for Yale and Tufts. Importantly, Sternberg concedes that the revised procedures at those universities might not be appropriate for all types of institutions: revamping entrance criteria is just part of the battle; it is also necessary to change how instruction occurs and how performance is evaluated. If a mismatch between entrance criteria, instructional styles, and assessment procedures occurs, negative washback is apt to take place.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The book is written in a lucid style that is easily accessible to general readers. The firsthand anecdotes drawn from Sternberg's many years in admissions and teaching also makes this text engaging. Although this book focuses on universities in the United States, the issues raised are relevant to educators around the world.

The main weakness of this book is its lack of practical detail regarding how a holistic rating system would be actually implemented. Although the Appendix provides some interesting examples of admissions questions designed to tap into creativity and wisdom-based skills, no information regarding how those essays were rated is provided. A future volume with assorted case studies involving the challenges of implementing a holistic admissions/teaching/testing program would be most welcome.

Another criticism is that the author needs to address the possible *expectancy effects* of introducing so-called “wisdom-based” essay questions into high-stakes testing environments: will applicants “walk their talk” and live up to the words in the application essays? No doubt, some cosmetic idealizations will occur. However, Sternberg offers a useful anecdote about this issue. When he first announced his candidacy for president of the American Psychological Association in 2001, he said it felt like it was a form of play-acting that was not yet authentic. Gradually, however, Sternberg gained a sense of ownership of his “talk” and a desire to live up to the standards that he was espousing. Students might not live up to all of the ideals they write at first, but reflective applicants will seek ways to make their espoused beliefs and actions congruent. In this sense, wisdom-based essay questions can have positive washback and provide a useful lens into the awareness of university applicants.

The Bottom Line

Sternberg concludes by acknowledging that his own theories of intelligence, like scientific discoveries in general, will eventually “be replaced by still better ones” (p. 178). At this point in time however, he stresses that the augmented theory of successful intelligence that he advocates can “help colleges recognize students who have the creative, practical, and wisdom-based abilities” (p. 175). Although his recommendations should not be interpreted as panaceas, Sternberg provides encouraging evidence that they will help make university campuses, and eventually society at large better.

- reviewed by Tim Newfields
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