Is "Good Enough" Good Enough For Swarthmore?

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Jane is preparing for an elegant dinner party. For dessert she intends to make a Grand Marnier soufflé. She’s wondering whether all of the elaborate and involved steps in the recipe are really necessary. She’d like to experiment, to see if the work can be simplified. But she won’t experiment today. Today she’ll follow the recipe as she has before, because she wants a soufflé that works.

Jack is a subsistence farmer. He wonders whether a different method of cultivation might produce a larger yield. He’d like to experiment too. The problem is that his crops feed his family, and if his experiment fails, his family may starve. So he won’t risk it.

The point of these examples is twofold. First, there is no substitute for experimentation for unlocking the world’s secrets. But second, experimentation carries risks. If we actually care about results—a light soufflé or an abundant crop—we can’t always afford to experiment.

Yet the commitment to experimentation has enabled science to transform our understanding of the world. To cope with risk, science invented a domain for experimentation that is essentially risk free: the laboratory, a place in which the pure quest for knowledge can be separated from its applied consequences. Engineers can’t do experiments with the bridges they build. But they can do experiments in laboratories that lead to new techniques of bridge design.

Schools are—or should be—laboratories too. Students striving to achieve mastery should experiment with the materials they study, exploring new ways to think and talk and write about them. Even if these new ways prove unproductive, much will have been learned from the effort. Real mastery in the classroom demands risk taking; it demands experimentation. And when, on occasion, experiments in learning lead to new ways of thinking that are a real improvement on the old ways, everybody benefits.

Yet in many high school classrooms today experimentation is discouraged because so much is riding on the results. Among today’s high-achieving high school students, the future seems to depend on getting into selective colleges or universities like Harvard, Yale, Stanford—or Swarthmore. Despite the fact that these institutions now cost almost $30,000 a year, every one of them has been experiencing an all-time record number of applicants, to the point that applications now outnumber places by more than 10 to one. (This year Swarthmore received more than 4,000 applications for fewer than 400 places. Harvard sifted through more than 18,000 to find 1,600 new students.)

Why such intense competition? It is probably a reflection of a widespread belief that the United States has become, in economist Robert Frank’s words, a “winner-take-all society.” For the few who make it to the very top, untold glories and unimaginable salaries await. For everyone else it’s going to be a life of perpetual struggle and uncertainty. With the perceived stakes this high, any rational person will do whatever is necessary to get a leg up on the competition. And of course this concern with being the “winner” doesn’t stop when the admissions letter arrives; it surely continues all the way through college, if not all the way through life.

Though a good deal is now being written about the unfortunate consequences of living in a “winner-take-all society,” the focus is characteristically on the losers. I’m focusing here on the winners. Those who apply to elite colleges and universities are hardly a random sample of our national high school senior class. They are the best students at their respective high schools. Almost every one of them is good enough to succeed at Harvard or Swarthmore, but only one in 10 will be given the chance.

What does such intense competition do to the kids who win? I believe it turns the high school class-
room into the equivalent of a subsistence farm, where
the stakes are so high that students can’t afford to take
risks. Everything they do is calculated to produce bet-
ter credentials—high grades, great SAT scores, impres-
sive extracurricular activities. Such intense competi-
tion sacrifices risk taking, intellectual curiosity, and the
desire for mastery on the altar of demonstrable suc-
cess—a light souffle. As a result, even though on paper
these applicants look better than ever before, they
may actually be learning less.

Thus by making themselves so competitive, our
elite colleges and universities are subverting their own
aims. They are admitting students who have done the
wrong things for the wrong reasons in high school and
who are likely to be disappointing students in college.
Is there anything, other than hand-wringing, to be
done? After all, these top schools can only admit so
many students, and if 10 times that many want to
come, competition seems inevitable.

Not so. There is a simple step that elite institutions
could take that would dramatically reduce competition
and thus change the distorted adolescence that many
of our most talented students now experience. All that
is required is this: When Swarthmore gets its 4,000
applications (or Harvard its 18,000), these schools
should screen the applications only to decide which of
the applicants is good enough to be admitted. In the
case of Swarthmore, this might reduce the pool to, say,
2,000. Then, these 2,000 names could be placed in a
metaphorical hat, and the “winners” drawn at random
for admission. While a bright high school student
might have to distort her life substantially be seen as
the “best” (if that is what admission to a place like
Swarthmore requires), she won’t have to distort her
life nearly so much if all that is required is that she be
“good enough.”

This modest proposal may seem preposterous at
first, but it isn’t. There is little doubt that a random
fifth of the 2,000 applicants that survived an initial
screening would make a fine first-year class at Swarth-
more. While admissions professionals like to believe
that they have the discernment and diagnostic ability
to look at 2,000 wonderful applicants and pick 375 of
the superwonderful from them, there is a large litera-
ture on human decision-making that makes clear that
people in such positions are much more confident of
their abilities than the data warrant. In other words,
picking one-fifth of the qualified applicants at random
might be just as good a way of producing a great class
as the hair-splitting scrutiny of folders that is the pres-
ent practice.

With a procedure like this, the desperate efforts by
high school students to climb to the top on the backs
of their classmates could stop. Schools could once
again be places for experimentation. Learning could
once again be driven by curiosity rather than competi-
tion. Adolescents could once again devote at least
some of their time to figuring out what kind of people
they are and want to be. The result, I’m convinced,
would not be worse students but better ones.