



Some Thoughts on Academic Diversity

An excerpt from a letter to a local independent school regarding the role of learning differences in a school population:

. . . As demand for admissions in many [independent] schools has increased, we fear there is a tendency to screen out the students who appear potentially less capable, particularly those with a history of a specific learning disability. It must be a difficult job to decide who will have the opportunity to attend and who will not, and logic might suggest that the school should choose only the "best" students. The determination about who the "best" students will be speaks clearly about the values of the school.

One value that many independent schools seem ready to claim is an appreciation of and active search for diversity in their students and faculty. When we talk about diversity in school populations, we quickly think along the lines of race, culture, or socio-economic background. Too often we overlook learning styles and abilities as factors in the broad spectrum of people with whom we need to communicate, work, and live. An independent school certainly is entitled to choose only the most elite learners, and there is a strong precedent to do so and to take pride in this position. It does, however, conflict with the ideal of serving a broader range of the population with whatever benefits that may bring to the school and society as a whole.

Just how does the learning disabled student benefit a school? All students can profit from learning to appreciate differences in themselves and others. They must learn to admire others for their abilities, not to criticize their disabilities or differences, in order to work effectively with all. They need to recognize their own pattern of strengths and weaknesses then find new ways to bolster what they can do and bypass what they cannot by finding alternate ways to realize their goals. We generally admire resourcefulness and persistence in those who face and overcome obstacles.

Teachers, too, can benefit from students with different learning styles. There is often a concern that responding to these students requires additional effort and time that could take away from the capacity to serve others. We would assert that, more often, the effort that goes into considering teaching strategies and presentation, materials, and communication, is effort that will make that instructor a more effectual teacher for everyone. Teachers who are focused primarily on the content and not the process are likely to overlook the needs of not only the learning-different student, but also the students as a whole.

Perhaps it is a more admirable value for a school to seek the ultimate achievement of each of its students rather than the ultimate achievement level for its student body as a whole. That suggests that a school should look at not only how each potential student will benefit the school, but also how the school might benefit each student. After all, the most capable student is not always the hardest working, and, for example, the student who lacks speed in math computation may demonstrate extraordinary artistic talent or political insight. Priorities in admission are a tough determination to make, but certainly worth careful consideration from a variety of perspectives.