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9-1-1997

Is "Good Enough" Good Enough For Swarthmore?

Barry Schwartz

Swarthmore College, bschwar1@swarthmore.edu

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Recommended Citation

Barry Schwartz. (1997). "Is "Good Enough" Good Enough For Swarthmore?". *Swarthmore College Bulletin*. Volume 95, Issue 2. 16-17.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology/775>

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Is “good enough” good enough for Swarthmore?

Two views of the college admissions “rat race”

1 **Barry Schwartz: Why selective colleges should become less selective—and get better students.**

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 experimenta-

tion. 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-





ELEFTHERIOS KOSTANS

Roll the dice ... *"In many high school classrooms today, experimentation is discouraged because so much is riding on the results," says Barry Schwartz. He proposes that colleges like Swarthmore reduce the pressure on high school students by setting some basic qualifications for admission and then choosing the entering class at random. Schwartz is the Dorwin P. Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action and associate provost of the College. His most recent book is *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (W.W. Norton). The views expressed in this article are his and do not reflect Swarthmore admissions policy.*

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 better credentials—high grades, great SAT scores, impressive extracurricular activities. Such intense competition sacrifices risk taking, intellectual curiosity, and the desire for mastery on the altar of demonstrable success—a light soufflé. 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 to 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 Swarthmore. 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 literature 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 present 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 competition. 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. ■