Campuses' Culture

American colleges and universities are often seen as islands of political correctness, wallowing in self-indulgent identity politics. They are riven by racial and ethnic tension, and seemingly epidemic levels of sexual assault. The institutions skew left, to the point of hushing conservative voices. The students are snowflakes, too fragile to hear (let alone engage with) challenging ideas—and often emerge from their schooling ill-prepared for employment. And don't even get going on the sector's runaway costs.

This is a parody of external perceptions of higher education (although in some quarters, not *much* of a parody). Might it be instructive to probe the reality within?

That sort of question had not occurred to Hobbs professor of cognition and education Howard E. Gardner '65, Ph.D. '71, who has spent most of his life within Harvard (doing pioneering work on multiple intelligences and the ethical architecture of work and the professions)—pursuing and championing the liberal arts and comfortable in the assumption that that vision of education was at the least widely shared. Having noticed that the discourse had shifted in recent decades, beginning with parents' and students' increasingly careerist concerns, he changed the focus of his research to higher education proper. Rather than add to the tiresome literature of *opinion* about conditions on campuses, he resorted to old-fashioned, social-science habits of collecting and analyzing *data*.

The result, perhaps the largest study of its kind, has begun to yield discoveries pertinent to the national conversation about higher education, and to the ways places like Harvard might understand themselves. They range from a sobering take on the primacy of liberal arts per se—and internal priorities that differ significantly from public perceptions of campus culture—to surprisingly convergent concerns among students enrolled at very different kinds of schools, and a new way of thinking about types of undergraduates and their aims.

Beginning in 2012, Gardner, senior adviser Richard J. Light (Pforzheimer professor of teaching and learning), senior project manager Wendy Fischman, and their Graduate School of Education team launched what became a seven-year program to take stock of what they then conceived of as "Liberal Arts and Sciences in the 21st Century." On each of 10 campuses (too few to represent the thousands of U.S. institutions, but carefully chosen to mix types: highly selective or not, large or small, public or private), they conducted 200 in-depth interviews, with entering and graduating students, faculty members, administrators, trustees, recent alumni, parents, and even a few job recruiters.

Their data-gathering spanned 2,000 hours of interviewing, twice that investment in transcription and coding, and days of observing the 10 schools: the Borough of Manhattan Community College, Cal State University Northridge, DePaul, Duke, Kenyon, The Ohio State University, Queens College (part of City University of New York), Tufts, and the University of New Hampshire. As a kind of comparison, the researchers included Olin College of Engineering, a vocational school which also values the liberal arts. (None of the others is explicitly vocational.) As Gardner put it in a series of talks in January, when he began sharing some data and nascent impressions, the researchers sought to understand ways in which the institutions' constituencies were aligned or misaligned, internally and across campuses; and new ways of thinking about higher education broadly.

COURTESY OF HOWARD GARDNER

Howard Gardner and Wendy Fischman, now analyzing interviews from 10 campuses

Almost immediately, Gardner found his own thinking misaligned with present perceptions of the "liberal arts." That term lives at the center of Harvard College's expressed educational purpose, but the interviews showed that very few informants had any idea of what the liberal arts comprise—nor any sense that they are engaged in liberal-arts education. To the extent the concept had meaning, it was largely partisan and negative: "liberal" in the political sense, or "anything goes," or soft courses prescribed to get a degree—a diversion from the serious task of preparing for a job. Of necessity, the Gardner team has reflagged their research as a more anodyne study of "higher education in the 21st century."

And are the members of campus communities consumed by free-speech controversies, or racial tensions, or sexual assault? Not by their own account. Nor are they focused on pedagogical issues such as online learning, the impact of social media, the role of the arts, or instruction in ethics. Instead, two themes emerged almost universally: *belonging*, and *mental health*. Gardner is loath to offer explanations, pending deeper analyses. (But one might speculate that in a society increasingly divided socioeconomically and racially, any academic institutions that actively aim to construct diverse communities may create the first such experience their students have ever encountered, causing them to examine and question their own and others' identities, and whether they feel included in such new circumstances—academically, socially, and institutionally; see "Adjacent but Unequal," March-April, page 26.) The heightened focus on mental well-being tracks with reports of rising demand nationwide for campus counseling and mental healthcare services.

Gardner's presentation suggested that there are differences between students matriculating at selective colleges or research universities and those attending community colleges in acquisition of "HED capital" (the team's acronym for higher-education, as opposed to "liberal-arts," intellectual capital—knowledge skills, critical thinking, the ability to ask questions and make connections, and so on).

But perhaps more interesting is a typology for thinking about students' own narrative about why they enroll and what they seek.

Gardner sorted out undergraduates who are:

- inertial (you go to high school, then you go to college, on autopilot);
- transactional (you do what's required to get a degree, then go to work or graduate school);
- exploratory (you go to college for a one-time opportunity to try something new or

to dabble in a new field); or

• transformational (you go to college to examine your fundamental beliefs and values).

The latter category accounts for a small minority of the students interviewed (fewer than one-fifth). Probably *every* college or university has at least *some* of each kind of students. The mix does vary with an institution's selectivity and mission, but the larger finding raises all sorts of interesting questions about how professors might accommodate their young charges, to expand their horizons and perhaps enlarge their aims and accomplishments, and how varying institutions succeed—or could do better—in encouraging such gains. Gardner's team found upperclassmen *more* likely to be transactional, and *less* likely to be exploratory, than entering students, perhaps as life after graduation looms; but they also detected an uptick in the small cohort who conceived of their higher education in transformational terms.

The typology is also a useful framework for thinking about alignment. At one point, Gardner reflected on Amherst College (he was a trustee). Some of its doctorally trained, liberal-arts faculty members, whose own career goals focused on academia, found themselves severely challenged in recent decades as members of a newly diverse student body, with different preparation and expectations, came to campus. Restoring alignment required pedagogical adaptations that achieved important educational gains. He also sketched other interesting examples of alignment, such as DePaul's "city as a classroom" fall-semester class for entering freshmen, a structured curricular commitment to service and civic engagement across most disciplines, consistent with that Catholic institution's Vincentian mission.

In the best social-science tradition, the research also points to some counterintuitive findings. Students' relative lack of expressed interest in details about the curriculum or pedagogy, Gardner noted, means that the experts—faculty members and administrators—are relatively free to make changes that might improve alignment within their communities and enhance the education they provide. And even though an academic community obviously must ensure that its members feel that they belong and can comfortably and safely pursue their work together, some degree of alienation *is* functional—to stimulate speaking out, prompting change, and pursuing intellectual growth.

Although much of the project's data analysis and publication of results lie ahead, Gardner underscored the importance for any school's leaders of knowing and enunciating its mission—and then investing accordingly. Public perceptions of luxe student centers and climbing walls to the contrary, the research suggests strongly that such investments should focus much more on teachers, informed advisers, and skilled support personnel than on facilities or the latest technology.

Gardner and his colleagues are sharing their findings at https://howardgardner.com/category/life-long-learning-a-blog-in-education .~J.S.R.

SPORTS

All Instincts

For speedy center fielder Ben Skinner, slowing down is key.

by JACOB SWEET

THE THOUGHT of stealing makes Ben Skinner '19 smile. On the baseball diamond, speed is his biggest asset. But to steal second base, he needs to get to first, the only one that can't be stolen. To reach it, he can draw a walk or get hit by a pitch, but mostly he hits a ball into play and beats any throw to the bag.

Skinner is often looking to drive the ball up the middle, out of reach of the shortstop and second-baseman. If he's ahead in the count—the pitcher has thrown more balls than strikes—he may swing for more power, slightly increasing the upward angle of his swing. If he's behind, he'll shorten his motion and just try to swipe the ball into play. He is known as a contact hitter, but making contact isn't easy. A baseball is less than 3 inches in diameter, and most Ivy League pitchers throw into the high-80s-miles-per-hour range, minimum. Almost every pitch reaches the plate in less than half a second.

Hitting was simpler in high school. Most pitchers, even around Moraga, California—

After missing the first few games of the 2019 season with a concussion, Skinner has been among the Ivy League leaders in on-base percentage.

Photographs courtesy of Harvard Athletic Communications