

BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed by Pam L. Gustafson, Long Island University, Post Campus

College Admissions for the 21st Century

By Robert J. Sternberg, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2010

College Admissions for the 21st Century reviews the American admissions process and offers solutions to the often uninspiring and inflexible progression of applications through an admissions office. Author Robert J. Sternberg has served a variety of upper and mid-level administrative, staff, and professorship roles in higher education, and is a past-president of the American Psychological Association. He is currently a professor of human development at the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University. In the book, he describes and critiques components of the admissions process and points to strategies to expand the pool of applicants for serious consideration using innovative methods, such as Kaleidoscope.

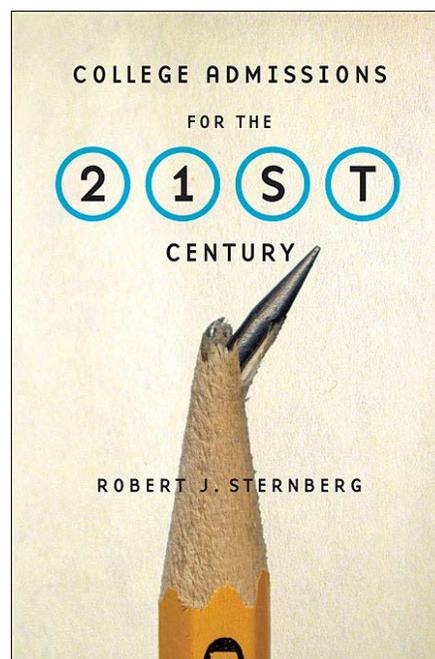
The book is divided into seven chapters. The first three review traditional application components and processes, including standardized tests, interviews, prior experiences, letters of recommendation, affirmative action, and open and restricted processes. Sternberg then discusses intelligence, creativity, wisdom, and when and how to assess hidden talents (vis-à-vis the Rainbow Project and Kaleidoscope Project). He concludes with a chapter on encouraging creativity, practical intelligence and wisdom through new methods in the admissions process, and wraps up the book with a reflection on these processes as a piece of a larger system and the implications for students, colleges and society. The book also includes a sample of Kaleidoscope questions used during Sternberg's tenure at Tufts University.

In the preface, Sternberg describes his journey into higher education. Unlike many on the administrative side of higher education, his entry into the profession was intentional, beginning with his sophomore year

at Yale where he challenged the admissions procedures, drawing from his previous experiences with summer jobs at assessment companies. In short, Sternberg's purpose is presenting options for admissions offices to do a better job at admitting students by thinking broader about abilities and "valuing, assessing, and teaching for analytic, creative, practical, and wisdom-based skills." Indeed, this framework closely mirrors the holistic concept of Graduate Enrollment Management.

Sternberg begins with the tangible output of admissions processes. He immediately casts himself as non-elitist, and rather a thoughtful evaluator of the larger system, by noting that even schools like his alma mater graduated the likes of George W. Bush and Bill Clinton – whose major flaws included faulty evidence for war and "self destructive tendencies," but whose admission to the school was typical. The problem of admissions, he argues, is that the admissions process is incomplete. Testing is not bad, it just doesn't provide enough information either way, assessing for others skills is crucial to moving forward, to including a more socioeconomically diverse student body across all colleges, and ultimately to providing students, the institutions and society with the benefits.

Sternberg argues that admissions processes should account for applicants who have the potential to be leaders and active citizens. Those whose work post-graduation will add value to society in positive and meaningful ways. Those attributes cannot, of course, be determined based on standardized test scores. Additionally, those attributes cannot be assumed to be in tote with any higher education curriculum. By shifting thinking about students to a holistic approach, admissions processes can begin to shape classes with individual



students whose range is varied, cohorts whose interactions are informative and transformative, and an educational experience that mirrors the variation of intelligence, of lived experiences, and of needs across society.

Sternberg takes a critical and balanced view of past practices. He asserts that the desire for a quantifiable, precise measurement makes decisions much easier, despite the evidence that these measurements do not capture the whole picture. Sternberg wants the whole picture. Enrollment management staff and program faculty want to know that students will be able to engage with class material in meaningful ways, bring an open mind and diverse experiences to an issue, and actively participate on the level expected of students at the institution. Retention numbers, ratings and other factors plague the admissions process at any university with pressure from a varied set of stakeholders.

Sternberg's focus is on undergraduate admissions processes in particular. However, the approach he argues for is very much in line with changes in graduate admissions offices across the country as they move toward an integrated approach that considers the whole student experience from recruitment through graduation. Graduate programs differ significantly from one another, both academically and administratively. Perhaps more so than undergraduate programs, graduate programs tend to align with a particular field, a specific orientation or an explicit school of thought. The way in which material is delivered in graduate programs may or may not fall into a single instructional method. These variations across the academic programs into which applicants are admitted must be considered when designing an admissions process that accounts for the characteristics, experiences and knowledge required for dynamic teaching and learning. Sternberg's argument is that a room full of students with high test scores is no longer going to suffice as institutions strive to educate citizens of today's society.

Sternberg offers an example of a graduate student whose GRE scores were weak but whose letters of recommendation and research experience were superb. Denied from the program but offered a position as a research assistant, the applicant flourished when she reapplied two years later. Notably, the systemic issue of increasing diversity in graduate education begins well before applicants apply to a graduate program. Of course, the issue isn't just looking beyond low standardized test scores and

to the full picture of the applicant; other barriers exist such as limited access to professors for recommendation letters and limited opportunities for professional experiences that would enable applicants to demonstrate skills or potential.

This book offers two examples of solutions to the need for a broad-based approach to admissions applications. Kaleidoscope attempts to tap into varied intelligences and creativity, which Sternberg and many others in higher education argue are key to leadership and innovation in the 21st century. For teachers, the concept of assessing multiple intelligences is often called "authentic assessment." Sternberg's second example is the Rainbow Project, which sought to measure creative and practical skills. These solutions both require that applicants either submit an additional essay from question prompts or respond to questions in a structured interview. Both of these are meant to supplement at the institution's existing admissions processes.

Changes in graduate enrollment management have led to an increase in workload for many staff members. Sternberg briefly mentions the issue of increased cost in terms of time and money by noting the donated funding he received to pilot Kaleidoscope at Tufts. He does not offer a solution to the important issue of time and human resources to review all of the supplemental application pieces. While he states that admissions officers were "encouraged, though not required, to provide analytical, creative, practical, and wisdom ratings for each student," he does not describe the rating

process or the time involved. Exploring innovative approaches to admissions is a much-needed undertaking across higher education, and appropriate administrative support is a critical component in the success of any new approach. GEM staff may have already rolled their eyes at the "latest" thing one of their administrators heard about that will be implemented without considering additional staff, time or other resources. This does not mean it cannot be done. While this text does not address it, others have begun to. Future research in the field should include the incorporation of innovation management in the field of admissions.

Sternberg's argument is that it behooves admissions offices to develop strategies that effectively bring in the students that faculty are excited to have in their classes. The ones that bring as much into the classroom as the content itself. It is important to note that Sternberg does not discuss faculty involvement in this process at all. This important component cannot be missed when developing admissions processes and criteria. Sternberg rightly calls on admissions to rethink their processes in this easy-to-read and accessible text. He offers real-world examples with a pragmatic, non-elitist approach. Sternberg argues, "Our children, and the colleges and universities they attend, deserve better than the antiquated, unevenly successful system currently in place." Unlike other texts about admissions processes or higher education as a whole, Sternberg's even-toned book enables a thoughtful review of the past, current, and potential future of this vital process of admitting students to programs in higher education. ■