

College Admissions, the MIA Model, and MOOCs: Commentary on Niessen and Meijer (2017)

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Suppose you have been put in charge of admissions at a newly developed institution of higher education. There is a tremendous buzz about your new school, and it seems as though everyone in the world wants to attend. Unfortunately, you only have physical space for a few thousand students. How would you decide whom to admit? What criteria would you use and why?

If you take this thought experiment seriously, then you will soon find yourself reflecting on many of the same issues raised by Niessen and Meijer (2017, this issue) in their intriguing article. The question of who gets access to scarce resources and why is a question that reflects our deepest values and priorities. It is also an issue that impacts millions of students around the world each year. Thus, critical reflection on the college admissions process can only help to strengthen discussions around this topic. Toward that end, I will comment briefly on the major strengths and weaknesses of their article and make a suggestion for one way readers might frame their thinking on these matters.

I will start with my suggestion. Niessen and Meijer cover a wide range of topics including, but not limited to, (a) admissions criteria, (b) predicted outcomes, (c) self-report measurement, and (d) adverse impact. However, this all takes place in the absence of a guiding theoretical framework. As such, the topics covered drift between big-picture strategic planning and psychometric minutia. The article would be better served if it adhered to a broader theoretical framework for systematically evaluating these issues. One possible framework, proposed by me and my collaborator Damian Bebell, asserts that mission, implementation, and assessment at an institution should be congruent (the MIA model). I will frame my critique of their article using this model.

As Sternberg (2016) has pointed out, there are several different models in American higher education, each with their own primary educational mission. They range from what he calls the Jacksonian model, in which job skills are highly valued, to the Hamiltonian model, in which

students are selected primarily based on their critical thinking and cognitive abilities, to the Jeffersonian model, in which applicants are selected for a broader range of skills that include both cognitive ability and civic engagement. Further, because it has been empirically demonstrated that not all institutions value or aim to develop the same array of skills, abilities, and competencies¹ among their students, the particular combination of core competencies valued in their mission is one thing that makes each institution distinctive (Schmitt, 2012; Stemler, 2012). If institutions have different aims and value different skills, then why would we expect all institutions to select students using the same few measures? Instead, it seems reasonable that institutions should adapt their admissions criteria to suit their specific institutional values whether that takes the form of broadening their admissions criteria or narrowing them.

Although Niessen and Meijer are “sympathetic to the aims underlying the idea of broadening selection criteria” (p. 436), perhaps the major weakness of the article comes from their failure to appreciate the extent to which admissions criteria and predicted outcomes are inextricably bound. In shifting the discussion away from admissions criteria and toward predicted outcomes, the authors assert, “Perhaps solving the discrepancy between learning objectives and the curricula is more of a priority than is solving the discrepancy between learning objectives and admissions criteria.” (p. 437). The authors’ use of “learning objectives” and “curricula” suggests that the classroom is the only place where the core competencies that are at the heart of the university mission are developed. By contrast, many admissions officers assume that a good deal of implementation of the institutional mission will happen outside of formal instructional time in

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the classroom, which is why GPA may not always perfectly reflect the development of the highly valued core competencies. Indeed, most admissions officers, at least in the United States, think about admissions in terms of “creating a class” of students who will inhabit the institution and who will reflect many different types of diversity (Steinberg, 2002; Stevens, 2009; Zimdars, 2016). Efforts to bring diverse students to campus are prioritized because it is thought that students will benefit from informal interactions that take place outside of class time: in the dorms, at the dining hall, at the gym, in club meetings, at parties, at university events, etc. From an admissions point of view, these informal interactions also bring with them the opportunity for students to develop core competencies such as communication skills, ethical reasoning, and intercultural competence. Further, the impact upon students of this informal learning through peer interaction has been used as a primary justification in support of race-conscious admissions policies (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

The contrast in perspectives between those who believe that education is entirely classroom based and those who believe that education also takes place outside of the classroom has important implications for which predicted outcomes get assessed. Instruction at the level of classrooms tends to be explicit and to focus on domain-specific knowledge. Success in this approach is defined via the use of GPA. By contrast, if education takes place beyond the classroom at the level of the university, the nature of learning is just the opposite. Through their informal interactions with others on campus and their participation in university life, students tacitly will be acquiring domain-general competencies that are at the heart of the university mission and that, to date, go largely unassessed. Clearly, both types of learning are important; however, the fundamental problem for both admissions and outcome assessment is that GPA is almost exclusively the outcome that is predicted in any validation study of admissions criteria.

Niessen and Meijer suggest a compromise position by arguing that core competencies should be assessed in the classroom and integrated into the course GPA. The problem with assessing core competencies by wrapping them into classroom GPA is that GPA then becomes an even more multi-dimensional and non-comparable indicator than it is already is. This is neither prudent nor necessary. Henry Chauncey, founder of the Educational Testing Service, once fantasized about developing what he called a “Census of Abilities” (Lemann, 1999). The concept was that if we could test every person on every conceivable attribute, we could then have a complete profile of strengths and weaknesses on which to judge that person. Although a complete census may be a stretch, the field of psychology has come a long way in developing a broad

palette of assessments of interesting constructs including emotional intelligence, creativity, empathy, self-directed learning, practical intelligence, leadership, ethics, citizenship, teamwork, wisdom, motivation, self-efficacy, and much more (e.g., Boyle, Saklofske, & Matthews, 2014; Stemler & DePascale, 2015). Ultimately, Niessen and Meijer seem unwilling to break free of the idea of a single GPA indicator as a gold standard. Unfortunately, adding even more constructs into the computation of GPA will not help us to better understand and evaluate students’ strengths and weaknesses, nor will it help us understand the skills that our universities are doing a good job developing or those that could be improved. Only a system in which the skills valued in the mission are congruent with how those skills are developed via implementation (be it through co-curricular learning or formal instruction), and in which the same core skills are assessed (both upon admission and as outcomes), will yield a theoretically sound model. By treating the components of the MIA model as distinct parts, Niessen and Meijer overlook the extent to which these components impact one another as part of a holistic system.

The element of the Niessen and Meijer article that I found to be the strongest and most exciting was the samples-based approach to admissions they discuss. With the widespread proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), admissions officers could easily ask students to engage in exactly the kind of samples-based assessment the authors describe. Further, technology yields access to all sorts of other metrics (i.e., what the authors call “signs”) that would allow admissions officers to gain information on how students respond to feedback, how they engage with the course (frequency and duration of login, discussion board activity), civility in interactions, etc. Test-monitoring software is also readily available to verify the identity of the participants. All of this could be made available to applicants for free and across great distances without any cap on enrollment numbers. It would give applicants the opportunity to engage in content that is directly relevant to what they would be asked to do upon admission and would likely enhance predictive validity. Based on their research, applicants would also likely see the samples-based assessment as more fair, and admissions officers would get to assess a broader set of signs as well as a sample of their work.

Another great strength of the article is the cross-cultural nature of the research. The majority of studies of college admissions tend to be conducted in the United States. This article provides one of the few studies of college admissions outside of the United States to be published in a major journal. This is important because traditions surrounding who makes admissions decisions and what factors “count” vary by country, and we have only begun to see systematic research detailing these cross-cultural comparisons. Hopefully this article will spark further

investigations into how admissions decisions are made across various cultural contexts and will provoke further dialogue around core issues in college admissions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Note

1. I will henceforth refer to these as *core competencies*.

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