

The Peer Factor

On Friday, February 7th, 2003, The Chronicle of Higher Education held an interesting real-time on-line colloquy on the topic, “***Do smart students influence each other academically?***” The chat was moderated by Eric Hoover, the Chronicle’s editor for Student Affairs, and featured Gordon C. Winston, professor of economics from Williams College. Prof. Winston has been guiding a lengthy and interesting research project focused on the topic of academic peer influence that is based at Williams. Much of the research can be found on the web at [www.williams.edu/wpehe/].

Not surprisingly, the answers to the question topic all seemed to be a resounding “yes!” During the one-hour forum, educators from across the nation wrote in with comments or questions on the research available on the topic, but no one suggested that the influence of the peer factor was minimal.

This is hardly a surprise to parents, who typically try to control their children’s friendships and social exposure, choosing schools, activities and neighborhoods based on the peer friendship influencers available for their children.

Given their concern and interest in setting the stage for their children’s future successes, parents, parents and student applicants want and need opportunities to know more about student life on campuses they are considering – more information than they can usually glean from a short campus tour. Picking the ‘right’ college has as much, if not more, to do with choosing a peer group than with choosing a faculty for its Nobel winners, or a ‘core’ or ‘open’ curriculum, or a campus location.

The students themselves are increasingly recognized as part of the highly-prized resources offered by selective colleges. Consequently, students are accepted not only for their ability to utilize the resources of the campus appropriately, but also for their ability to attract other outstanding candidates.

Moreover, rather like the books in the college library, students must represent a breadth and depth of experience, background, goals and perspectives, in order to provide each other and the faculty, with an educationally broad experience. Having different editions of the same work is simply not good enough. Select schools emphasize the significant educational need for real diversity on campus.

The college admissions office is charged with the role of recruiting a complex community whose very presence nurtures its learning experience. To do so, they may fly by the perfectly-groomed candidate with the top grades and scores in order to add dimension and depth to an incoming class. In the six-to-ten minute read they usually give to an application, they are trying to see a real person and the passions and drives that will make them exciting, committed investors contributing to the vitality of the community.

The successful candidate, then, is often the one who has done research about the college's offerings and opportunities, attitudes and ambiance, and can describe how s/he will 'fit' and contribute – like a new volume revealing fresh scholarship on the library shelf. Knowing this important information may help kids create applications that catch the attention of the admissions officers. Developing applications under the guidance of someone who is thoroughly familiar with the college application process and with the current experience on college campuses is extremely valuable for the student determined to produce dynamic, attractive and successful applications.

Getting to know current college students well enough to ask them questions – all kinds of questions, from the seemingly trivial to the potentially important – may be one of the best ways a teenager can get to know what college life is really like. Finding a 'generational mentor' is a smart idea. A current college student can tell you what s/he wished s/he'd known before going to college! They can talk with you about balancing your academic and co-curricular activities, and the challenge and rewards of making your own decisions. Above all, they can tell you how the peer factor flows and affects their campus life and their academic experience. For example, there may be a tendency for student athletes in particular sports to major in the same area – say, sociology. The peer factor would certainly be evident here – but what kind of response and respect does a team member receive if he chose to major in computer science, or comparative literature? Only a student can provide an answer.

One of the most exciting consequences of going to college is rarely mentioned, but is, I think, a transformational experience. Schoolchildren tend to think of their peers as those people in their age grade – an anthropological term that means just what it says. And in fact, children usually play primarily with other youngsters who are within a year or two of their own age, and often in the same grade in school. Unless they are siblings, and often not then, fourth-graders don't play with second-graders; high school juniors and seniors don't spend time with 9th graders. When students enter college, they tend to think of their entering class as their peers, and some colleges do much to foster this class spirit. Others do not.

Depending on the nature of a college's curriculum – how much opportunity first and second year students have to choose their courses from an open curriculum or from a core curriculum, designed for underclassmen – sooner or later they will begin to study and work with students from all years, particularly as they find their focus and declare their majors or concentrations. Suddenly the concept of 'peer' begins to take on a new meaning – one more in line with its real definition.

The term 'peer' really has nothing at all to do with age. A peer is a person who has equal standing with another, as in rank, or class. It is an expression of equality. So in fact one's peers are those with whom one shares a common background, or sense of purpose, and the responsibility that comes with one's place in the group.

During the college years, students expand their concept of who their peers are from their age grade to those people with a common interest, purpose and goal. If they are fortunate enough to earn the opportunity to do research with a faculty member, their concept of peer with really unfold, as they may well complete a project or even publish an article together, as colleagues.

Certainly as they graduate from their college, they will come to appreciate the concept of 'peer' as it applies to all graduates of their *alma mater* (Latin for 'nourishing mother'), when alumni mentors support and open doors for them into future opportunities for personal and professional development. This is, of course, the 'peerage' that students have earned and for which parents have invested so much support. This is what draws alumni back to campus for 'Homecoming' football games and graduation weekends. It's what moves them to pull out their checkbooks and support their college's search for bright, talented young people who can and will expand the 'peerage' in dramatically exciting ways, bringing new perspectives, new vision, and new commitment to a dedicated group that is constantly changing, constantly examining itself, and constantly committed.