Kaleidoscope

Admitting and developing “New Leaders for a Changing World”

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In the fall of 2005, the Academic Council of Tufts University proposed a new slogan to characterize its mission in educating students: “New Leaders for a Changing World.” Many colleges, of course, have slogans of various kinds. The challenge is how each translates its words into action in an authentic manner.

Sternberg’s theory of leadership—called “WICS,” an acronym for wisdom, intelligence, and creativity synthesized—seemed like a potential basis for implementing the mission as well as an opportunity to add a more discretely creative dimension to Tufts’ evaluation of undergraduate applicants. According to the theory, people are leaders by virtue of making a positive and meaningful difference to the world at some level, from the family right up through the community, state, nation and world.

The theory suggests that leaders need to be: a) creative in generating a vision or new ideas for how to effect positive change; b) analytically intelligent in ascertaining whether their ideas are, in fact, good ideas; c) practically intelligent in implementing their ideas and in persuading others to accept their ideas; and d) wise in ensuring that their ideas will help their stakeholders to attain a common good in the long term as well as the short term, through the infusion of positive ethical values. These skills are viewed as modifiable and flexible, rather than fixed and static.

Our goal at Tufts was to infuse the WICS theory into strategic points within undergraduate (and eventually, graduate) education. The initial strategic points were undergraduate admissions, instruction and assessment. Infusion into admissions would be done through a pilot initiative to augment the Tufts-specific supplement to the Common Application with a set of questions designed to assess WICS in freshman applicants. Infusion into instruction and assessment would be accomplished with the help of the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, which helps teachers enhance their already considerable teaching skills by showing them ways in which WICS and other ideas from cognitive science can be integrated into their instruction and assessment. The focus of this article is on the admissions initiative.

Admissions initiative: Kaleidoscope

The initiative in undergraduate admissions came to be called “Kaleidoscope.” Our intent was to assess wisdom, analytical and practical intelligence and creativity by deliberately inserting optional exercises in the undergraduate application. Most of these exercises are in the form of an optional, written essay, although each year at least one nonverbal exercise is included.

Kaleidoscope is not simply about writing essays. It represents an opportunity to enhance the way admissions officers conceive of and understand applicants within a holistic and highly competitive selection process. Admissions officers use Kaleidoscope, as well as the other traditional elements of the application, to rate each applicant on one or more of four scales: wise thinking, analytical thinking, practical thinking, and creative thinking. This enhancement of the typical admissions ratings categories supplements the existing academic and personal ratings that most highly selective admissions processes use. Kaleidoscope offers the Tufts admissions staff another perspective to consider; it is a window into a set of attributes that, we believe, corresponds with the core values of education at the university.

Ideally, Kaleidoscope enhances Tufts’ ability to select future leaders by recognizing and rewarding the qualities of good leadership in its undergraduate application and selection process. In doing so, it sends a strong message to applicants, their parents, guidance counselors and other interested parties that Tufts is serious about assessing academic data (scores and grades) but also about other essential aspects of the whole person. Although the Tufts admissions process has always been holistic in its approach to candidate evaluation, Kaleidoscope augments the traditional admissions assessments that have served the university so well for so many years. The quality and rigor of a high school transcript, standardized testing, personal essays, teacher and counselor recommendations, and so forth continue to offer a rich set of information that informs admissions outcomes; in fact, an SAT or ACT score is evaluated as one measure of the analytical skills that constitutes part of WICS. But Kaleidoscope expands this suite of information and offers tangible data that quantify, often uniquely within an applicant’s file, what is often labeled “an intangible” in most admissions processes.

From the standpoint of the WICS theory, the SAT or ACT is incomplete. An admissions officer needs to know about the analytical skills these tests measure but also about other skills that these traditional tests were never designed to capture. Obviously, all information needs to be considered in light of each student’s family and school background and the opportunities with which the student has been provided in the course of his or her life.

Kaleidoscope exercises

The exact Kaleidoscope prompts vary from year to year. Here are the exercises used for the 2009 admissions cycle:
1. Since the silent movies of the 1920s first flickered on the screen, the medium of film has inspired, provoked, entertained and educated. Select a film whose message or imagery resonated with you long after the credits rolled. How did it capture your imagination or affect your consciousness?

2. Engineers and scientists like astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble discover new solutions to contemporary issues. “Equipped with his five senses,” Hubble said, “man explores the universe around him and calls the adventure Science.” Using your knowledge of scientific principles, identify “an adventure” in science you would like to pursue and tell us how you investigate it.

3. The 44th President of the United States will be inaugurated on January 20, 2009. If the 2008 presidential primaries were an indicator, young voters will have had a substantial voice in the selection of the next American president. Offer an open letter to the new president: What issue would you like to see addressed in the first 100 days of the new administration. Why does this matter to you?

4. The human narrative is replete with memorable characters like America’s Johnny Appleseed, ancient Greece’s Perseus or the Fox Spirits of East Asia. Imagine one of humanity’s storied figures is alive and working in the world today. Why does Joan of Arc have a desk job? Would Shiva be a general or a diplomat? Is Quetzalcoatl trapped in a zoo? In short, connect your chosen figure to the contemporary world and imagine the life he/she/it might lead.

5. People face challenges every day. Some make decisions that force them beyond their comfort levels. Maybe you have a political, social or cultural viewpoint that is not shared by the rest of your school, family or community. Did you find the courage to create a better opportunity for yourself or others? Were you able to find the voice to stand up for something you passionately supported? How did you persevere when the odds were against you?

6. Use an 8.5 x 11 inch sheet of paper to create something. You can blueprint your future home, create a new product, draw a cartoon strip, design a costume or a theatrical set, compose a score or do something entirely different. Let your imagination wander.

7. Use one of the following topics to create a short story:
   a. The Spam Filter
   b. Seventeen Minutes Ago…
   c. Two By Two
   d. Facebook
   e. Now There’s the Rub…
   f. No Whip Half-Caf Latte
   g. The Eleventh Commandment

Note that the questions differ in the skills they emphasize. No question is a “pure” measure of any single component of WICS because our goal is to assess these qualities as a synthesis—as they work together. Scoring of the exercises is holistic and is completed by admissions officers using rubrics with which they are provided by the Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise at Tufts. We have found that, with training, admissions officers can achieve good inter-rater reliability (consistency) in their evaluations.

**What we found**

Academic achievement remains the most important dimension of Tufts’ undergraduate admissions process. But Kaleidoscope shows that a selective college can introduce “unconventional” exercises into admissions without disrupting the quality of the entering class. Since we introduced the Kaleidoscope pilot in 2006, applications have remained roughly steady or increased slightly, and the mean SAT scores of accepted and enrolling students increased to new highs. In addition, we have not detected statistically meaningful ethnic group differences on the Kaleidoscope measures. Controlling for the academic rating given to applicants by admissions officers (which combines information from the transcript and standardized tests), students rated for Kaleidoscope achieved (statistically) significantly higher academic averages in their undergraduate work than students who were not so rated by the admissions staff. In addition, research found that students with higher Kaleidoscope ratings were more involved in, and reported getting more out of, extra-curricular, active-citizenship and leadership activities in their first year at Tufts.

The positive effects of Kaleidoscope on the university’s undergraduate applicant pool and enrolled class should not be disentangled from the effects of other initiatives, especially increased undergraduate financial aid—which at Tufts is always need-based. Initiatives like Kaleidoscope can help identify an able, diverse group of students but, without adequate financial aid and university commitment, the effects of the program will not be fully shown in actual matriculation figures.

As Tufts seeks to identify and develop new leaders for a changing world, Kaleidoscope helps identify potential leaders who may be best positioned to make a positive and meaningful difference in the future. In the fast-paced, data-driven atmosphere of highly competitive college admissions, Kaleidoscope validates the role of qualitative measures of student ability and excellence.

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