

Civic Engagement, the Undergraduate Academic Experience, and Policy Implications:
Results from the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey and the
SERU21 Project
Response to the Presentations by Richard Flacks and Gregg Thomson
By
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Who should be admitted into our nation's colleges and university's and how ought these decisions to be made?

Such questions are of particular significance to our public colleges and university's and even more so, not less so, for those that are prestigious and highly selective. We of the University of California need to be conscious of what it means to be a public, albeit elite, university and intentional/strategic about achieving the mission of a public university.

Here, at the nexus of public and elite universities, is where we find the University of California.

Admissions decisions at UC are guided towards a number of objectives, including enrolling students most likely to succeed and doing so in a manner fundamentally consistent with the most cherished values of our democracy: 1) reward achievements with opportunity, 2) in a way that is fair and equitable, recognizing that all have not had the same preparatory resources and opportunity. But in seeking out the students most likely to succeed, "succeed" in what way -- or better, "ways?"

This is where I see considerable educational policy value in the University of California's Undergraduate Experience Service and the concepts of service learning, civic engagement, and academic engagement. In particular, I see the work of UCSB Professor Richard Flacks and UCB administrator Gregg Thompson, among others, as visionary. I am delighted to provide a brief commentary on the work they have presented.

In admitting students, a number of admissions factors are characteristically employed: academic and academically-related factors that are quantitative and qualitative in nature. Those factors that determine the pool of California students guaranteed a seat somewhere in this multiversity are high school grades and ACT or SAT test scores.

These factors are validated for use in part on the basis of their empirical relation to university success. That success is chiefly indicated by 1st year college grades. Sometimes we consider other factors: 1st and 2nd year probation and retention statuses, 2nd year and graduation year cumulative GPA, graduation status in the 4th through 6th years, etc. These are all performance outcome criteria and not valueless as success indicators, though we account for an extremely limited proportion of these outcomes.

But what of the academic behaviors that produce them, such as academic engagement, or the behaviors and motivations associated with them, such as civic engagement. Are grade point performances and other similar indicators what we really mean by “university success?”

The University offers a wide array of learning and achievement opportunities, all having some important relationships to after-college societal contributions and achievements, achievements at least as important as college freshman GPA.

Yes, we want students to go into education: this would be an important area of social service, but what of management, leadership, and public policy roles? All of these roles may be outside the boundaries of our classrooms and laboratories but they are needed in society (and in the University).

We need some students to stay in our classrooms and laboratories -- with their degrees -- to function as professors like us. We need others to take what they have learned there into K-12, cultural arts institutions, city-state-national government ... and do so effectively.

The University offers these experiences and opportunities. And this is what I see expressed in the UCUES survey results.

If part of the University’s responsibility is to prepare educated and engaged citizens, those who will share in the responsibility of advancing society, address critical social issues, and serve the public good (not just their own private benefit and ambitions) ...

Then we see in the Flacks and Thompson works that we must think beyond the traditional criteria of university success (fresh grades). We must begin to seriously consider criteria that include civic engagement and global/community service.

And, just as academic success is multifaceted and not all captured by a simple factor such as freshman GPA, we see in their works that civic and global/community engagements are, themselves, multidimensional. And all facets have value.

We also see that different students pursue and are differentially prepared to pursue different facets of civic and social engagement ... and that’s fine. Such a reality argues for constructing, via our admissions policies, a diverse class of students -- students qualitative by their varied backgrounds, preparations, and motivations, for different achievements and contributions. With respect to admissions policies, we must return to the idea of “building a class.”

And we see in Richard Flacks’ work in particular that different admissions factors yield different student involvements on our campuses. Test score performance might counter-indicate certain student involvements and achievements.

Are we not interested

- in admitting students who are interested in all that UC has to offer?
- in admitting students likely to take advantage of various of these experiences and demonstrate achievements in them?
- in students who will achieve in these respects as well as in our classrooms and labs?

If so, then we must look beyond grades and test scores in admitting students. As Richard Flacks' work suggests, some of our tradition admissions criteria may counter-indicate certain of these involvements and achievements. Indeed, we need to return to the idea of "building a class" in admissions, thinking about all of the opportunities the University has to offer and selecting the diverse student body most likely to involve themselves and succeed in these myriad opportunities.

Finally, we must think intentionally and strategically about the many ways the University serves and can serve the greater good and make sure that we embody these considerations in the University's admissions policies.