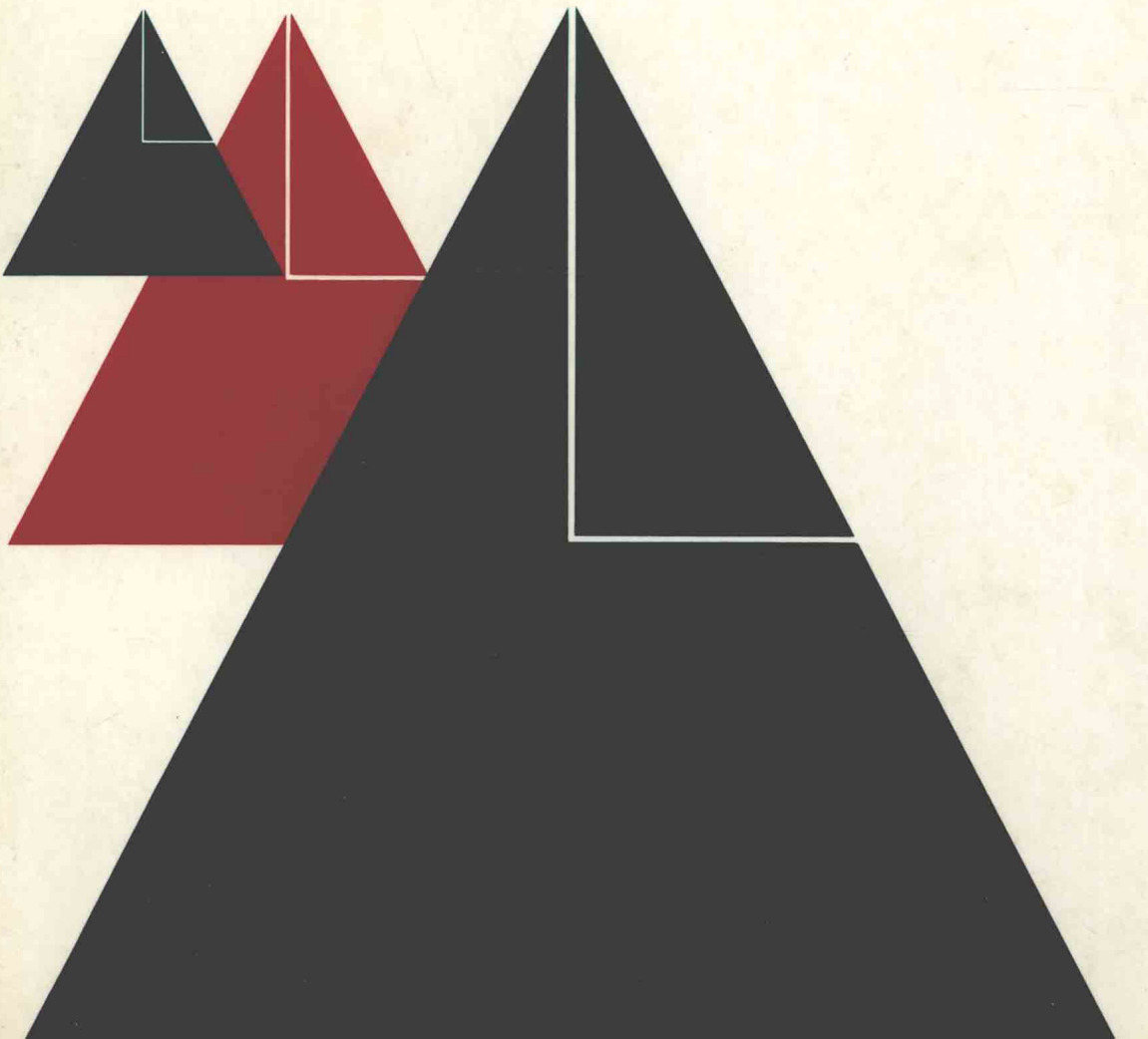
ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Alexander W. Astin



Achieving Educational Excellence

A Critical Assessment of Priorities and Practices in Higher Education

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In memory of my father, Allen V. Astin

Preface

Excellence and quality are perhaps the most fashionable concepts in education these days. And while many individuals and organizations are seeking better ways to promote excellence in our schools and colleges, very few have taken the trouble to define what they mean by excellence in the first place. Despite this inattention to definition, there are several conceptions of excellence that are *implicit* in our time-honored educational policies and practices. This book examines these traditional beliefs critically and finds them wanting on several counts: They are not necessarily consistent with the *educational* mission of institutions, they interfere with our efforts to expand educational opportunity, and their use does not promote greater excellence in the system as a whole. *Achieving Educational Excellence* proposes a very different view of excellence—the talent development approach—and discusses how we might go about implementing this alternative approach and how it might serve to improve the quality of our higher education system.

Since this is an intensely personal book, some brief biographical notes may help the reader to understand my approach. My interest in educational excellence originated more than twenty years ago when I accepted a research position with the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. An issue of special interest to me and my fellow researchers was the college-choice behavior of the Merit Scholars and Finalists. Even though these exceptionally talented students qualified for admission to almost any college or university, their choices tended to be confined to a relatively small number of institutions. When we made a list of these most-preferred institutions, it was limited largely to the most famous or prestigious institutions in the country. The fact that each new crop of Merit Finalists produced an almost identical list of most-preferred institutions convinced me of two facts: (1) We Americans have developed a folklore about our higher education system in which the different institutions are organized hierarchically into a kind of pecking order; and (2) highly able students manifest their belief in this folklore by choosing the "best" or "most excellent" institutions at the top of the pecking order.

Most of my research at National Merit focused on the impact that different types of colleges have on the student's personal and intellectual development. One of the first things I noticed from these studies was that the "best" colleges at the top of the institutional pecking order did not always turn out to have the "best" impact on the student's personal development.

When I was invited in 1965 to head up the research program of the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C., I jumped at the chance, since the council is the principal place where the top administrators and policy makers in higher education congregate. I felt, on the one hand, that the research would benefit from the involvement and counsel of these educational leaders and, on the other hand, that *they* would benefit from a better knowledge of how their institutions were actually affecting their students.

It was at the council that my colleague Robert Panos and I set up the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), which was designed primarily as a continuing series of large-

scale longitudinal studies of how students are affected by their institutions. The CIRP, which has so far involved more than five million students, one hundred thousand faculty members, and twelve hundred institutions, has provided a rich source of data for continuing studies of American higher education. Much of what we now know about institutional impact on student development has come from CIRP data.

My research on students has covered the entire spectrum of student "talent," from National Merit Scholars to disadvantaged and "open admissions" students. These studies have looked at literally dozens of student outcomes, including retention, cognitive development, affective development, and career progress. I have at different times focused my analyses on a wide variety of institutional types: research universities, elite private colleges, "invisible" colleges, state colleges, single-sex colleges, technological institutions, denominational colleges, community colleges, and historically black colleges. And I have personally visited perhaps two hundred different college campuses and had an opportunity to present my research findings before most of the major national associations and professional societies in the field of higher education.

Practitioners and policy makers, however, have not always been receptive to the findings of these studies, particularly when those findings fail to support our conventional notions of excellence in higher education. The experience of trying to disseminate these findings convinces me that the time has come to take a critical look at our traditional beliefs and theories of excellence. One problem is that these theories are seldom stated explicitly; rather, they are more often implicit in our actions and policies. By stating these theories explicitly and by showing how they influence our institutional values and priorities, I hope that some faculty members, administrators, and policy makers may be motivated to consider alternative definitions of excellence that are more consistent with higher education's educational mission.

Since most of us share a concern about excellence in higher education, this book is intended for a broad audience. College administrators and faculty members, for example, are

interested in how we define and measure institutional excellence and in the relationship of quality to admissions policies, pedagogical techniques and theories, and the academic reward system. Counselors, advisers, and other student-affairs personnel have a common concern with enhancing students' development—one of the main foci of the book. And trustees and state and federal policy makers are typically interested in issues such as expanding access, developing human capital, and the relationship between resources and educational quality.

Chapter One describes the American higher education system, particularly its hierarchical aspects. The hierarchy of institutions is seen as providing the principal basis for our conventional notions about excellence. Several "models" of higher education (such as the industrial production model and talent development model) are discussed. It is argued that the most valid conception of excellence is one that is most consistent with the purposes of higher education. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the benefits of higher education and of how these benefits relate to notions of quality and equity.

Traditional concepts of excellence—the reputational, resources, outcome, and content approaches—are reviewed in Chapter Two. Although the two most widely held views—reputation and resources—are found to be mutually reinforcing, they fail to satisfy three fundamental requirements: Neither is necessarily consistent with an institution's primary educational purpose; neither contributes to the expansion of educational opportunities; and adherence to either view offers little possibility of enhancing the overall quality of higher education in the United States. While the outcomes view suffers from some of the same limitations as the reputational and resources views, its use does offer some possibility of improving the quality of institutions. The final traditional view—the content approach—is difficult to evaluate because of the lack of research evidence.

An alternative to traditional views of excellence—the talent development approach—is presented in Chapter Three. The talent development approach to excellence emphasizes the intellectual and personal development of students as a fundamental institutional purpose. According to this view, an excellent

institution is one that facilitates maximum growth among its students and faculty. Unlike the reputational and resources approaches, the talent development view does not limit either educational opportunities or the overall excellence of the system by identifying only a limited number of colleges and universities as "the best." Any institution can be "excellent" if it deploys its resources wisely and effectively to facilitate the intellectual and personal development of its students and faculty.

Chapter Four reviews a number of issues related to educational equity: the meaning of equity, the availability of educational opportunities, testing and tracking, educating underprepared students, and the "conflict" between excellence and equity. Data are presented showing that the "highest-quality" educational opportunities are not equally available to low-income and minority students. While traditional testing and selective admissions practices support the reputational and resources views of excellence, they also serve to deny equal educational opportunities to low-income, underprepared, and minority students. The talent development view of excellence, on the other hand, tends to broaden opportunities because it values the educational development of *all* students and does not necessarily favor the well-prepared student over the underprepared student. Unlike the reputational and resources views of excellence, which generate conflict between the goals of excellence and equity, the talent development approach offers a means of achieving both goals simultaneously.

Chapter Five examines the role of teacher training and education schools in the academy. Data are presented showing that the pool of students aspiring to teaching careers has been declining in both quantity and quality at all levels (primary, secondary, and postsecondary). These declines may be attributed in part to the attitudes and policies of faculty members, administrators, and institutions: the low status accorded schools and departments of education within academia, the low value placed on teaching careers at the precollegiate level, the refusal of the most selective institutions to offer an undergraduate major in education, and the low priority given to excellent teaching in the academic reward system of most universities. To a

certain extent, these attitudes and practices reflect the reputational and resources conceptions of excellence, which value the best-prepared students over other students and which value scholarship over teaching. Many of these problems could be ameliorated by embracing a talent development view of excellence. Outstanding teachers would receive the same rewards as outstanding scholars, pedagogy and teacher training would be elevated to higher status within the academy, and larger numbers of the better-prepared students would be encouraged to take up careers in teaching.

Chapter Six presents a theory of student learning and development—the involvement theory—which is designed to assist institutions in fulfilling their talent development mission. *Involvement* refers to the quality and quantity of the physical and psychological energy that the student invests in the college experience. The theory holds that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice in developing student talent is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. One special strength of the involvement theory is that it seems to explain much of what we know about effective teaching and about institutional practices that facilitate student retention and development. The theory of student involvement can be regarded as a useful *tool* to be used by both faculty members and administrators as they attempt to design more effective environments to facilitate talent development.

Specific suggestions for enhancing the educational excellence of our colleges and universities are presented in Chapter Seven. The chapter first presents specific strategies for increasing students' involvement through changes in instructional methods, student-life activities, and methods of assessment and feedback. Next, the discussion turns to what educational policy makers can do in four areas—student involvement, teacher training, admissions, and research—to promote the talent development mission of higher education. The chapter then considers two types of institutions—the research university and the community college—that pose special problems when it comes to enhancing students' involvement and implementing the talent development conception of excellence. The following section exam-

ines various sources of inertia and conservatism that make institutions highly resistant to change. The key role to be played by administrators as change agents is discussed in the last section, which also provides suggestions for improving our methods of selecting administrators.

Chapter Eight analyzes trends in the characteristics of new students entering American higher education by summarizing the results of eighteen annual surveys conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. The survey results not only confirm the widely discussed decline in students' academic skills but also reveal major changes in their educational plans, career plans, and personal values. Students' increasing interest in business and other high-paying professional careers has been accompanied by increasing materialism and greater concern for attaining personal power and status. Declining student interest in the liberal arts and in virtually all of the human service occupations (such as teaching, social work, and the clergy) has been accompanied by declining altruism and declining social concern. These trends are seen as analogues to the different conceptions of excellence discussed in previous chapters. The reputational and resources views, for example, by emphasizing the enhancement of reputation and the acquisition of resources, represent values that parallel the increased student interest in money, power, and status. The talent development view, on the other hand, by focusing institutional resources and energies on helping students develop their talents to the fullest, promotes values that more closely parallel concern for others and for the society. The chapter concludes by discussing the significance of these alternative values for the larger society and for the excellence of the American higher education system.

In many respects this book can be viewed as a critique of the values that underlie much of our current educational practice and that give rise to our traditional conceptions of excellence in higher education. In many respects these values, once articulated, are not especially flattering. But beyond providing just a critique, I have also tried to articulate an alternative conception of excellence based on values that are not only more positive but also more compatible with our educational mission

and purpose. Moreover, I have tried to suggest a number of practical steps that institutions can take to implement this alternative view. If any significant fraction of our institutions is successful in implementing this alternative—the talent development approach—both the excellence and equity of our higher education system will be enhanced.

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Many people contributed to the production of this book. In the early planning stages, I was especially fortunate in having an opportunity to interview six leading scholars and educators—Howard Bowen, Arthur Chickering, Russell Edgerton, Patricia Graham, Joseph Katz, and David Riesman—to sound out their views on some of the issues I was grappling with. Although I realize that they may not agree with everything I have to say, their candor and their generosity with their time are much appreciated.

During the past two years I have had an opportunity to test out and refine my ideas through a number of speeches, workshops, and seminars conducted on a variety of college and university campuses and at the annual meetings of various educational and scholarly associations. The feedback received on these occasions has been invaluable in helping me clarify and sharpen my views, and I am grateful to the many faculty members, administrators, students, and association officials who took the trouble to ask questions and offer their views on what I had to say.

My thinking about these issues has also been facilitated greatly by my association during the past year with the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. I particularly want to express my appreciation to my study group colleagues—Herman Blake, Howard Bowen, Zelda Gamson, Harold Hodgkinson, Barbara Lee, and Kenneth Mortimer—and to our very talented staff: Cliff Adelman, Barbara Hetrick, and Dennis Jones. Our final report, *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education,* was a joint effort, with each of us sharing responsibility

for different writing tasks. The reader may find occasional similarities between parts of our report and sections of Chapter Six in this book. I shared an early draft of that chapter with the study group during our early deliberations, and I am flattered that they chose to incorporate some of the ideas in our final report.

When I finally decided to sit down and write this book, many colleagues at the University of California at Los Angeles and the Higher Education Research Institute willingly pitched in to help. Kenneth (Casey) Green was always ready to offer advice, assistance, and constructive criticism. William Korn has been a real gem in running a number of complicated data analyses, usually on very short notice. Paul Astin prepared a very useful summary of the research evidence on the underprepared student. Ayako Kadogawa, John Somers, Harrison Togiai, and Marilynn Schalit somehow managed to transcribe my (often inaudible) tapes. Mary Jane Maier not only transcribed tapes but was also able to keep track of the long list of references and the bits and pieces of chapters as they were completed. Laura Kent, the world's best editor, provided amazingly fast turnaround on some pretty rough drafts.

Various parts of this book utilize, in somewhat altered form, material that has appeared in earlier publications. The section of Chapter One on the benefits of higher education is based in part on the article "Differing Views of Institutional Quality: Implications for College Admissions Counselors" (*Journal of College Admissions,* Winter 1984, *102,* 3-10). Some parts of Chapters Two and Three borrow heavily from the article "Excellence and Equity: Achievable Goals for American Education" (*The National Forum: Phi Kappa Phi Journal,* Spring 1984, pp. 24-29). An earlier version of Chapter Six appeared in "Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education" (*Journal of College Student Personnel,* July 1984, *25* (4), 297-308). And portions of Chapter Eight were taken from "Students in the 1980s: Democracy and Values" (*AAHE Bulletin,* May 1984, *36* (7), 11-14).

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Los Angeles, California
March 1985

Alexander W. Astin

The Author

Alexander W. Astin is professor of higher education at the University of California, Los Angeles; director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA; and director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. Previously he was director of research for the American Council on Education (1965–1973) and the National Merit Scholarship Corporation (1960–1963). Astin has received awards for outstanding research from the American Personnel and Guidance Association (1965), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (1976), the American College Personnel Association (1978), and the American College Testing Program–American Educational Research Association (1983). He has also been a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1967–1968) and a recipient of several honorary degrees. Astin's work has appeared in more than one hundred articles and fifteen books, including *Minorities in American Higher Educa-*