The Meaning of Merit

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High, purely academic, individualized prior achievement measured by reasonably sophisticated tests of learned content and
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Why call this *merit*?
The English Way

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Why call this *merit*?

Reflects talent and industriousness.
What’s wrong with the English way?

Multiple intelligences

Past success imperfect predictor of future success
Developed talent is not really merit

A meritocracy is a system in which the people who are the luckiest in their health and genetic endowment; luckiest in terms of family support, encouragement, and, probably, income; luckiest in their educational and career opportunities; and luckiest in so many other ways difficult to enumerate--these are the folks who reap the largest rewards.
The parable of the islands

Island of the Best. Violinists. Ever

Island of the Pretty Good String Quartet
The Island of Greatest Violinists. Ever.
The Island of the Pretty Good String Quartet
The sum of the talents

Violinists = 44

Pretty Good String Quartet = 28
How to think about merit: why do we want higher education?

Development of the higher level knowledge and skills the use of which, in concert, will optimize social good, and the attitudes and dispositions that incline those with those skills to use them to that end.

Contribution to social mobility
Social Good

Good: the outcomes of social, economic, political and civil activity that enhance the quality of people’s lives

Social: Extra weight to the good of the less advantaged.
“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded”
So what does merit *mean*?

Possession of those traits that predict a student will gain more from a spot that they will contribute to the social good than a rival candidate would.
The American Way

Recognizes the value of diversity
“Constructing a class”

- Allows affirmative action
- Allows pursuit of diverse missions
- Allows distinct institutional identities
What is merit for my institution?

“What is our contribution to the social project of higher education?”

turns on:

- Identity
- Discovery
- Intention
What is our contribution to the social project of higher education?

We seek the student body that will optimize our contribution to the overall mission of higher education, given who we are, given what others do, and given what we predict we can do.
Unpacking the American Way

Dimensions of diversity across and within institutions:

Socio-economic
Professional orientation
Racial
Political outlook
Religious tradition and practice
Cultural
Geographic background
And now for a word from the people you sponsor…

What kinds of student do *the faculty* want?
The English Way

High, purely academic, individualized prior achievement measured by reasonably sophisticated tests of learned content and
“While I am an ambitious person who wants to take on a challenging career and succeed, I also know that what I am passionate about is something involving children and helping people and families...[the messages I get leave me] feeling guilty and somewhat un-ambitious regarding my career choice”

-- Fall 2014 Freshman at UW-Madison
Does our institution’s ethos align with these values?

Early Childhood
Education
Nursing
Political Science
Philosophy
Pre-Medicine
Pre-Law
Social Work
Does our institution’s ethos align with these values?

Sorted by institutional status

Pre-Medicine
Pre-Law
Political Science
Philosophy

Nursing
Education
Social Work
Early Childhood
Does our institution’s ethos align with these values?

Sorted by prospective social value

Early Childhood
Social Work
Nursing
Education

Pre-Med
Pre-Law
Political Science
Philosophy
Do our institution’s practices align with these values?

Can a case be made that the admissions advantage or scholarship some students get better enables you to contribute to the mission?

Race
Social Class
Gender
Geography
Athletics
Legacy
High ACT/SAT scores
Conclusion

The American Way is better
Conclusion

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The English Way is like the British Monarchy
Conclusion

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The English Way is like the British Monarchy so don’t be fooled!
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Live, don’t just talk, our values