



American College Students—1966-1995

Interview with Alexander W. Astin

Public Perspective: You and your colleagues are currently in the thirtieth year of surveying entering college freshmen. You also do other studies in which you follow a given panel of students along through their educational and occupational careers. Would you tell us how this important long-running longitudinal research got started and who the participants are?

Alexander W. Astin: Initiation of the project was driven by a sense that research on students conducted to date wasn't having much of an impact on policymakers. When I was approached by the American Council on Education to establish and direct a research program for them, I jumped at the opportunity. The Council is—you could call it somewhat uncharitably, the "college president's club"—where the leaders in higher education convene to discuss their mutual interests on educational issues.

Given the great diversity in American higher education—clearly the most diverse higher education system in the world—we wanted to include a large number of institutions in the data collection. With a sufficient number of distinct institutions we could allow for generalizations about how different approaches to education are affecting students. We started out with about 300

institutions. Over the 30-year span this number has grown to well over 600. The same institutions have not all stayed in, yet we have maintained a core group of 150 of the original 300. In all, we have surveyed close to 1,500 colleges and universities—more than half of the baccalaureate-granting institutions in the country.

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PP: What strikes you in this immense collection of data as the most important findings on what's been happening to

students in terms of the values and attitudes they bring to higher education?

AWA: First, reviewing the surveys we do each year of entering freshmen, we are looking at a mirror of society. In many ways the young people reflect the society. From that perspective I would say the most important findings involve the profound effects of the women's movement, which have stabilized in the last six or seven years but appear to be virtually irreversible. Also, the profound change in student values away from the existential value question about developing a meaningful philosophy of life to concerns about money, power and status. It looks as though a substantial segment of young people have traded the more existential values for materialistic ones.

PP: On that point, we were looking at the data on the importance of being very well off financially. In 1971, 40% said such attainment was "very important" while in 1994 this figure had soared to 74%. Is something powerful occurring here, or is this an interesting artifact which really isn't tapping anything deep?

AWA: It is definitely large and deep. There is enough corroborating evidence including content analysis research of several major publications, indicating

that interest in money and financial affairs has gone up dramatically over this 30-year period. Beyond content analysis, the college freshman data contain evidence for the trends, including changes in students' career interests. Students are now more inclined to pursue fields of study that allow for large financial payoffs.

In my opinion, television exposure is the leading source for this development. If you look at the data on the increasing numbers of houses with television over this 30-year-span the tremendous surge in exposure relates strongly to the development of more materialistic values. The data have convinced us that television is at least part of the answer. As houses became saturated with television and viewing habits leveled off, changes in both materialistic and existential values leveled off as well. I think that whole area needs more exploration. If we are going to understand ourselves as a society, where we are headed and where we have been, we really have to begin looking at the broad area of television's impact. Our educational system needs to recognize the overwhelming influence of television, how it has changed politics and the way people lead their lives. Yet, there is nothing that I can see in our educational system that reflects or combats this.

PP: You ask the entering freshmen whether they have engaged in various activities, including participation in organized demonstrations. In the mid-to-late-1960s, 16% said they had engaged in this behavior "frequently" or "occasionally." Participation has risen steadily to 40% in the 1994 study. This finding is counter to a lot of pictures held today of what's been happening to student participation generally. How would you interpret this change?

AWA: It's another manifestation of general negativity that young people experience in their attitudes toward authority, government, adults, and institutions. There is an enormous latent potential in the student bodies of most colleges for dissent and disruption. The

difference between now and the late 1960s and early 1970s is that today we don't have large galvanizing issues. Students' rights, race and the war—each of these issues mobilized students.

Using data from the late 1960s and early 1970s, we studied effects of unrest and protest on campuses. Colleges stonewalled the students on the war issues. Although there was a lot of publicity about a few ROTC programs shutting

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down and war recruiters not coming on campus, basically the colleges stonewalled the New Left. The irony of it is that a lot of the campus protest eventually helped to wake up the nation, although I think that television's portrayal of the war was more influential.

PP: We were struck by responses to the question on how concerned students are about financing their college experience. Despite the huge increase in college costs at many institutions, in 1994 only 19% of entering freshmen described financing college as a major concern. Students are coming out of college with staggering debt burdens—but at least as freshmen entering school they seem to lack concern. How do you read this?

AWA: Financial aid was designed to equalize the net price of higher education—and to a large extent it has worked. Financial aid is mainly need-based. Many people across the spectrum complained that the cost of the college is itself such a big factor that it must be considered in need analysis; if you don't make it a factor then the net price isn't achievable.

The interesting substantive effect of this is that colleges charge what they need to charge to pay their bills. Except for the very elite institutions with huge endowments, most private colleges get their financial aid money from tuition. What happens is that if financial aid from the government dries up, which it has been doing, the college has to raise its tuition to generate the missing aid. Upper middle-class parents wind up paying more of the student aid. Then, of course, the need of the student increases. So there is a point of diminishing returns in trying to finance financial aid this way. That is what the institutions have had to resort to in order to make up the difference, and they always fall a little short, so the students have had to rely more on borrowing. This has just begun to affect their perception about their financial situation.

PP: In addition to the entering freshmen surveys, data on given cohorts is collected by following the same students over time. What are some of the findings that stand out most in these longitudinal surveys?

AWA: On the theoretical side, we have repeatedly validated and extended what I call the "theory of student involvement." This theory can be interpreted to mean there is "no free lunch." That is, you get out of an educational experience what you invest in it, regardless of what the institution does. The best way for a student to maximize his or her educational development and experience is to invest in the process. All of the things which one would interpret as "engagement," "investment," "time on task," "vigilance", or what we like to call involvement, which we look at as the

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investment of time and energy in the process, are associated with greater learning, greater change in affective characteristics and generally, if you want to put a value on it, positive outcomes.

The most powerful effects of involvement are on finishing college. The basic idea is invest in yourself and you'll get a good return in the process. What this means, in terms of educational policy, is that the overarching objective of our programs should be to get the students involved. The structures that we create on the campus to implement our programs ought to be designed with that in mind. The most precious resource we have is the time and energy of the student. We ought to think of them as our resource. This is why, in part, the outcome of both commuter education and part-time education have been so miserable. If you don't invest, you don't get any return.

On the applied level, we find the greatest single source of influence on students is the peer group. Peer group effects have been suggested by decades of research on student cultures, but in this case we are able to show that student beliefs and values and self-concepts tend to change over time in the direction of the peer group. This is clearly illustrated with political beliefs.

We have been able to link the findings of the longitudinal studies with those of the entering freshmen surveys. When we started this program in the late

1960s and early 1970s, left-wing students outnumbered right-wing students by three to one. The dominant political leaning of the undergraduate in America in those years was clearly left. Longitudinal studies before we got into the business—the work of Theodore Newcomb, for example—had found that one of the overall effects of being in college is that you tend to become more liberal politically. The liberalizing influences of the undergraduate experience were demonstrated in dozens of studies. However, in our most recent longitudinal studies, there isn't any net liberalizing effect. And consecutive entering freshmen sur-

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veys now indicate almost an equal balance between students on the left and students on the right. For each college that has a “liberal peer group,” there is one that is conservative. By putting these two findings together I think we can explain why being in college now

doesn't have a net liberalizing influence on the overall student population.

PP: That's interesting indeed. Is there another dimension of this peer group factor that you are describing apart from the politics of it? Do you find instances where the university may have an outstanding faculty and curriculum, yet where the peer group climate is negative in terms of educational achievement and performance—leading to a kind of “neutralizing” effect? Are faculty quality and student peer group culture independently important dimensions of the overall college experience—and sometimes contradictory ones?

AWA: Yes, we do find independent effects of faculty. There isn't by any means a one to one correspondence between the kinds of students in an institution and the kinds of faculty. There is a modestly strong correlation but it's by no means one to one. So you have universities where there is, if you will, a misfit between the faculty and the students, although there is a tendency for them to be similar. The faculty and students tend to reinforce each other positively or negatively.

The biggest single influence of the faculty is on student political values. Students tend to be influenced by their professors' politics; that's a clear-cut finding. Today, of course, there is a bigger misfit in the political area than there ever has been because faculties are still pretty much left-leaning, whereas their students now are very much middle-of-the-road.



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