College admissions, diversity, and performance-based assessment

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College Admissions, Diversity, and Performance-Based Assessment: Reply to Stemler (2017)

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Stemler (2017, this issue) provided a constructive comment to our article on broadened admission criteria in higher education (Niessen & Meijer, 2017, this issue); we thank Steven Stemler and we provide a short response. Stemler's main criticism of our article was that it lacked a theoretical framework. Let us clarify our theoretical orientation about college admission: In our view, there are admission criteria and desired outcomes. In selection or admission research we try to show that admission criteria (predictors) are positively related to desired outcomes (also often denoted as criteria). This is common research practice in educational admission testing and in personnel selection (e.g., Ployhart, Schneider, & Schmitt, 2006). Stemler (2017) proposed a mission, implementation, and assessment framework (the MIA model) to guide the discussion about college admission. Whereas we use a different terminology, we are on the same page here. We agree that colleges differ in the skills they aim to develop and that this calls for different admission procedures that adhere to the skills that are valued at an institution. As pointed out in our article (see p. 437), we also agree that taking into account mission (in our terminology, the outcomes), implementation (in our terminology, the curriculum), and assessment of both admission criteria and educational outcomes is essential for good admission procedures and that these elements should be closely related.

It is precisely this relation that often seems to be lacking in practice and in many publications about college admission. The main problem is the assessment component. As argued before (Niessen & Meijer, 2017), regardless of the mission (or desired outcomes), outcome assessment is crucial. Stemler (2017) stated that we should not hold on to the classroom as the only place where important competencies are developed and that a large portion of the acquisition of core competencies happens outside of the classroom through informal interactions. Of course, we acknowledge that learning can and does take place outside of formal classroom environments, and we agree that this type of learning can be very beneficial.

However, if we are dealing with core competencies in the heart of a university mission, simply assuming that these competencies are being developed through informal interactions is not enough. In order to evaluate university missions and implementation, we first must be explicit about what type of competencies we expect students to acquire and we need to assess those competencies. That is precisely what is lacking, as Stemler (2017) also acknowledged.

Indeed, as Niessen and Meijer (2017) discussed, acquired knowledge and skills reflected by a degree should be in line with the university mission statement. If the mission is knowledge acquisition in certain domains, then outcomes can be specified as grades on domain specific courses. If the objective is to acquire skills such as leadership or problem solving, these skills should be incorporated and assessed in the curriculum. That can be done either through formal instruction or through more informal learning. Most often, however, university missions are multidimensional. Therefore, contrary to Stemler (2017), we think that it is necessary for GPA to become a more multidimensional indicator. If not, the MIA model will not hold. Furthermore, if we are interested in the acquisition of specific types of competencies, we can always use components of GPA that represent specific aspects of the mission. This approach is also common in the context of medical school admissions (Lievens, Buyse, & Sackett, 2005; Reiter, Eva, Rosenfeld, & Norman, 2007). So, with respect to outcomes, we argue that all competencies at the core of the university mission should be assessed formally and validly but not necessarily in one GPA that represents classroom learning.

Stemler (2017) also discussed that admission officers strive for a diverse class of students to aid learning through peer interaction. As we already discussed in Niessen and

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Meijer (2017), there is nothing against selection on the basis of other criteria than cognitive variables (see also Zwick, 2013, p. 15), and we agree with Stemler (2017) that diversity can lead to exciting and stimulating learning environments. But our point is that these choices are often based on societal arguments, and we should separate empirical predictor–criterion relations from societal arguments. In some of the studies we discussed (see Niessen & Meijer, 2017), the aim of using instruments like situational judgment tests, personality questionnaires, and biodata was to reduce adverse impact while increasing predictive validity (or at least not reducing it). However, this is difficult to realize because there are severe psychometric problems using many of these instruments when it comes to prediction in a high-stakes context (Brown, 2016; Niessen, Meijer, & Tendeiro, 2017). These are certainly not "psychometric minutia," because they have severe consequences for admission decisions. In addition, the question remains whether diversity in education can be achieved by changing admission criteria. There are large differences in college readiness depending on ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Strayhorn, 2014). A solution is to create more equality in opportunities to develop talents and skills and to develop performance-based assessments that can give us a full picture of student's developments.

In short, we value the work of Stemler (2012) and Sternberg (e.g., 2010) for initiating the discussion of what we should strive for in education and in society, and their first empirical results. Psychology is an empirical scientific enterprise, and as long as we want to use scientifically valid arguments to select students there are still many challenges to overcome. Performance sampling-based admission procedures (e.g., Niessen, Meijer, & Tendeiro, 2016) can be a next step to a solution where we carefully think about aligning mission, implementation, and assessment. Stemler (2017) also provided some interesting and useful applications and extensions of sample-based assessments, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and the use of test-monitoring software. We look forward to further contributions to this fascinating field.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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