A Chill in the Air?

On June 3—four days after Commencement, with graduates gone and undergraduates scattered for the summer—the College announced a shift in its academic-support paradigm, from counseling, provided since 1947 through the Bureau of Study Counsel (BSC), to skill-oriented coaching, to be delivered through a new Academic Resource Center (ARC). The emailed note from dean of undergraduate education Amanda Claybaugh and College dean Rakesh Khurana began briskly: “Nothing is more important to us than ensuring that you thrive academically at Harvard.” Rightly so: this is an educational institution, and students’ learning is central to its work.

There is much to be said for the change (detailed at harvardmag.com/bsc-to-arc-19).

- Students report a lot of academic stress, and techniques exist to help them do their work better—and make academic and extracurricular commitments more manageable.
- The students who might benefit from such skills are far more diverse than those thronging Cambridge after World War II. They arrived then with varying degrees of study savvy and combat trauma—but were otherwise more uniform (read: white, male).
- Other forms of diversity have cropped up, too—among them, the nation’s commitment to understanding and addressing the learning challenges of students formerly cast aside but now known to be coping with ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, and physical limitations, for which there are effective solutions.
- Among today’s campus cohort, the gap in K-12 preparation is probably wider—perhaps much wider—than for their mid-20th-century predecessors; ditto their families’ socioeconomic circumstances. Some observers have noted that the distinctions among such students include different degrees of willingness to consult or accept anything associated with mental-health counseling—which can be seen as inappropriate, or even socially stigmatized.

So, there is much to favor changing academic support—from alignment with Harvard’s mission (educating undergraduates and training graduate students), to bringing effective skills to bear on the sources of stress.

Much, but not everything

Not all sources of stress that affect academic performance are associated with readily coachable study or time-management skills. What is one to make of students, say, who come to college having internalized strong parental pressure to be premed—only to find they neither want to pursue that path, nor really know how to set out on another? Or whose families rupture once they leave home—or require their continuing financial contribution to make ends meet?

These tensions, loaded on to an adolescent newly enrolled in a community lacking familiar friends and family supports, may call for some level of counseling and support that does not rise to the level of full mental-health care. And for some of the students who most need that intermediate support between academic coaching and mental-health services (which may be far more stigmatized than a “counseling” relationship), BSC may be a kinder, gentler, more effective acronym, and organization, than the new ARC.

More broadly, today’s students at Harvard (and other similarly selective, elite institutions) differ from their predecessors in another way not associated with familiar ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic metrics. Nearly all of them got into a college or university that has the narrowest of funnels—which all but requires the highest levels of prior performance, academically and otherwise, to make the cut. In the prevailing high-stakes admissions game, many undergraduates seem hyper-focused intellectually and in their extracurriculars (valedictorian and state champion in soccer/orchestra/debate)—and underdeveloped emotionally. Advisers and tutors can tell stories about binge drinking and sexual hookups that have nothing to do with classroom challenges or grades. At least some of this seems to come from young people with high IQs and low EQs who don’t know how to have casual conversations, or go out on a date, or accept a minor setback without flipping out. (Advocates of collegiate sports say that one thing most student-athletes are good for is losing without losing it: going out to compete again the next day. Many teachers lament that students who arrive with stellar transcripts refuse to take real risks in a seminar, lest they be seen making a mistake.)

Finally, there is the matter of Harvard’s distinctive culture. Some years ago, when the College was considering whether to create a summer academic enrichment program for entering students from first-generation backgrounds or under-resourced high schools, one reason for not doing so was that participants would be stigmatized. Peer schools like Princeton and Yale have not found that to be the case, and there is even research conducted by a Harvard Graduate School of Education Ed.D., all the way over on Appian Way, demonstrating that students have embraced such identities (see “Mastering the ‘Hidden Curriculum,’” November-December 2017, page 18). But the Crimson culture famously prizes every tub on its own bottom—both structurally, in terms of the individual schools, and in its assumption that everyone admitted to the community can cut it individually: going to office hours for extra help, seeking other kinds of support.

The brand is wildly successful (consult the application data, admission rate, and yield). But there are those who will tell you that Harvard can be an impersonal place, especially for people who find, or feel, they aren’t winning at every moment of every day. It ought not to be excessively proud of that.

The ARC may focus resources productively on academic needs, applying the best current techniques from learning science and cognition to real problems, thus helping students succeed academically at Harvard. Resources aren’t infinite, and innovative universities like this one too infrequently close legacy operations in an effort to be at least a little lean. So the business case is clear.

Nonetheless, in moving simultaneously to close the BSC, the place may inadvertently cast some students adrift: interpreting their needs in terms that seem more efficient but are in fact less effective, thereby making their experience chillier and more challenging.

Varsity blues postscript. “Thinner Ice” (the July-August column) focused on the crooked admissions scandal. Higher-ed economists Sandy Baum, emerita from Skidmore, and Michael S. McPherson, past president of the Spencer Foundation and of Macalester College, usefully observe that the students involved are a tiny fraction of the tiny fraction of those at selective schools—which educate less than 5 percent of undergraduates.

Given the real issue (“opportunities to prepare well for demanding colleges are so unequally shared”), Baum and McPherson conclude, the scandal “invites close scrutiny of the admission practices of the colleges themselves,” including preferences for the children of alumni and the rich and famous: “Colleges have their own reasons... for maintaining these practices, but there will never be a better time for colleges to weigh their costs and benefits.” —John S. Rosenberg, Editor