From the Editor

The invited article in this issue addresses a major issue that should concern all academics: the challenge of academic advising for African-American collegiate athletes.

Harry Edwards, Professor of Sociology at the University of California — Berkeley, discusses such problems as the low graduation rates and institutional exploitation of African-American collegiate athletes. Edwards describes the historical backdrop to the current situation and proposes some actions to address these problems. For those who would like some readily accessible background to some of the issues Edwards addresses, I suggest this summer's August 5 and August 12 issues of ***Sports Illustrated,*** which are devoted to the Black athlete and which highlight some of Edwards's involvement in the late 1960s.

Mapping the Undergraduate Terrain

In the spring of 1963 I was a pre-med biology major. I vividly remember a particular morning when I received a midterm grade of D in an introductory calculus course. Later that day in organic chemistry, Al King, the guy next to me in the organic chemistry lab, accidently spilled my jar of predistillate down the drain. This jar of muck had taken three lab periods to create and was worth a significant portion of the course grade. The instructor told me that the situation was my tough luck for having put the jar where my lab mate could get his hands on it. No make-ups were allowed. These experiences were indicative of the high amount of pre-med pressure I was feeling. I was tired of the cut-throat, grade-oriented pre-med mentality that these experiences represented. I dropped out of pre-med that afternoon. But I was the kind of kid who needed a goal and a direction. The next morning I awoke with a vision. I was destined to become a marine biologist. What better way to combine my love of the water—I had been a competitive swimmer since childhood—with all of the biology courses I had accumulated? I had a goal and a direction, and I could apply all of my previously completed courses toward achieving this goal.

This was a crucial juncture where good developmental advising could have made a difference. No one was around to point out to me that, even though I was good at science (I went on to get a Ph.D. in zoology), I had no consuming passion for it. No one helped me see that I had been in a pre-med program because of interpersonal and social-relevance reasons, not because of science. My assumptions about what marine biology was all about were never tested by experiences or by advisors' challenging conversations. My assumptions came from classroom experiences and Jacques Cousteau's ***National Geographic*** specials, not from research experiences. And the irony is that, for my era of being an undergraduate, I had a very strong relationship with a committed advisor.

I got lucky. I like where I am today. As director of an academic program housed in a university residence hall, I joke that my switch from studying antagonistic and reproductive behavior in shrimp to my working with college students was merely a change in species. As well, I have learned to appreciate the concept of the random walk strategy. But I also realize that by underutilizing my undergraduate college resources, I overlooked many rich and possibly fulfilling opportunities for exploring my potential and my varied interests. And I sorely missed the advising/mentorship at that crucial stage of decision-making.

A major problem for today's undergraduates is the inaccessibility of comprehensible maps of the academic setting. Even the most primitive maps, the courses and programs catalogs that spell out the various course structures that lead to graduation, are relatively difficult to interpret for most students. But most students, having mastered these documents, think that they have mastered the map of their college. In reality, they have hardly begun to gain mastery. These are merely the surface rules—those rules you must know for basic survival. But they are surely not those rules for gaining enriched experiences.

Students who are entering college can often assume that they have a well-formed map for plotting their educational direction. After all, they have been participating in the institution of education for at least the past 12 years. K-12 students can, for instance, assume that their teachers have been hired to teach, that these teachers chose the profession of teaching in order to be teachers, and that these teachers are rewarded, both intrinsically and extrinsically, for teaching.

Such assumptions, when carried into college, can create a great deal of confusion. Take, for instance, the issue of tenure. Most students know little about tenure and, consequently, do not have an expectation of their instructors that matches their instructors' professorial agenda. On many campuses, faculty are not rewarded for the quality of their interactions with undergraduates. And, for many faculty, putting too much time into undergraduate teaching is a roadblock to professional advancement. Knowledge of the whole issue of tenure, then, is an important part of an undergraduate's map if that undergraduate is going to figure out how to access faculty beyond the classroom.

A map that aids access to one's college is a complicated map with many subtleties and many hidden routes. The rules of how to negotiate the academic setting are partially imbedded in the structure, and this structure is usually not well known by undergraduates. We may assume that the process of learning this map can be an important developmental process. But time is short. Learning to use this map on one's own takes time, and this time could otherwise be spent actually using the institution's resources.

A comparison can be loosely made to the experience of studying abroad. If a student spends a junior year abroad, embarking on this year with a conversational or fluent ability to use the language of the new country enables the student to have an experience that opens the depths and subtleties of the new culture. If the student goes abroad without these language skills, the experience is largely limited by the ability to use the language and is largely restricted to learning this language. Both experiences are valuable. But they are qualitatively different.

In one sense, faculty are the hidden or relatively inaccessible resources of most campuses. What they do in the classroom defines most of what students know about them. But what they do ***out*** of the classroom defines most of what interests them and what is truly unique about the academic setting. The faster students develop a map for accessing these—and other—resources, the more enriched their educations can be. Advisors, in their role as guides to academia, are the people who should be helping students gain this access.

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