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### Achieving Equity in Higher Education: The Unfinished Agenda

Alexander W. Astin<sup>a</sup> & Helen S. Astin<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of California, Los Angeles

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## Achieving Equity in Higher Education: The Unfinished Agenda

Alexander W. Astin, University of California, Los Angeles

Helen S. Astin, University of California, Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In this retrospective account of their scholarly work over the past 45 years, Alexander and Helen Astin show how the struggle to achieve greater equity in American higher education is intimately connected to issues of character development, leadership, civic responsibility, and spirituality. While shedding some light on a variety of questions having to do with fairness and equity, this research has not succeeded in removing the structural barriers to progress among underrepresented groups. Accordingly, the authors advocate that colleges and universities focus greater attention on developing student values and other personal qualities that will produce a new generation of citizens who are committed to creating a more just and equitable society.

Back when the authors first became involved in studying college students some 50 years ago, character development and equity were generally treated as separate issues. Over the years, however, the authors have come to see how intimately connected they can be. So part of the authors' intent in this article will be to show what they have learned from their research on equity and character development and how the two topics are interconnected.

After reviewing the themes of earlier Dalton Institutes, the authors have identified some of their own previous research that deals with one or more of five related topics: equity, values/character development, leadership, service learning/civic engagement, and spirituality. These same five topics overlap with the themes of just about every one of the Dalton Institutes over the years:

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander W. Astin ([aastin@gseis.ucla.edu](mailto:aastin@gseis.ucla.edu)) is Allan M. Cartter Distinguished Professor Emeritus and founding director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. In both 1990 and 2010 he was identified as the author most frequently cited by others in the field of higher education. Helen S. Astin ([hastin@gseis.ucla.edu](mailto:hastin@gseis.ucla.edu)), a psychologist, is a distinguished professor emerita and former associate provost of the College of Letters and Science at UCLA. The most recent of her 13 books are *Cultivating the Spirit* and *The Road from Serres: A Feminist Odyssey*. This article was adopted from the opening keynote address presented at the 25th anniversary Dalton Institute on College Student Values, Tallahassee, FL, February 5, 2015. The authors would like to express their appreciation to Christos Korgan for his assistance in reviewing the history of the Dalton Institute and the *Journal of College and Character*.

Equity (2015)  
Values/Character (1991, 2003, 2004, 2008–2010, 2013)  
Leadership (2005, 2006)  
Service, Civic Responsibility (1993, 1994, 2002)  
Spirituality (2002, 2005, 2006, 2010–2013)

To locate this research work in a larger context, the authors will also mention relevant historical events as well as selected key works by other scholars.

## Equity

America's struggle over the equity issue has a long history. Perhaps the seminal scholarly work in this field was Gunnar Myrdal's classic book, *An American Dilemma* (1944), which exposed the fundamental conflict between our nation's professed values of freedom and equality, on the one hand, and the second-class status and treatment of African Americans, on the other. It was not until 27 years later that Fred Crossland of the Ford Foundation documented the extraordinary racial inequalities in our higher education system in *Minority Access to College* (1971).

Throughout most of her professional life, Helen Astin's scholarly work has focused on issues of equity for women. A good deal of the impetus for this work was provided by her own personal experience as a young woman PhD in psychology trying to find work and also by being herself part of the unrest that arose during the early years of the women's movement. Her first book, *The Woman Doctorate in America* (1969), appeared just as the women's movement was beginning to gather steam. The considerable interest generated by this national study resulted in part from the fact that it debunked several myths about highly educated women, including the belief that they do not remain in the workforce because they drop out to have children and raise families. It also documented the existence of sex discrimination in the higher education work place.

For the next 30 years Helen Astin continued to work on issues related to women in higher education, publishing books and articles on topics ranging from the adult woman to women's career development to pay equity for women faculty. Over this same period, she has also remained an activist on behalf of women in higher education, serving in leadership roles at UCLA as well as national professional associations.

While both authors believe that women in higher education have made a great deal of progress since the late '60s, and while issues of equity for women have to a certain extent fallen off the policy issues radar, there remain a number of unresolved issues such as salary inequalities, violence against women, and continuing barriers to high prestige occupations and leadership roles.

Alexander Astin's early research on equity issues, which also dates back to the late 1960s, highlighted the hierarchical nature of the higher education system (A. W. Astin, 1970, 1975). While American higher education had long been characterized as "equitable" and "open access" because of its extensive community college system, the internal structure of the system is in reality very hierarchical and elitist, with the most "excellent" institutions available only to a small segment of the student population. Because admissions is based heavily on standardized test scores, poor students

and underrepresented Students of Color are denied equal access to these highly selective colleges and universities.

Despite the expansion of affirmative action admissions programs and the tremendous growth of federal and state financial aid programs over the past half century, these inequities have remained firmly in place. Students from the lowest socioeconomic quarter continue to be underrepresented in selective institutions by a factor of 50%, and the enrollment of middle class students in these institutions is actually on the decline (A. W. Astin & Oseguera, 2004).

The authors' earliest collaborative work dealing with equity issues was reported in *Higher Education and the Disadvantaged Student* (H. S. Astin, A. W. Astin, Bisconti, & Frankel, 1972). Following the turbulent era of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, a number of colleges and universities across the country initiated special educational programs aimed mainly at African American students, many of whom were enrolling under newly established special admissions policies. The authors' study, which involved an in-depth analysis of a diverse sample of programs for the disadvantaged, found that academic preparation and motivation were much more important determinants of college success than were the student's ethnicity or social class. Nevertheless, participation in these special programs appeared to enhance academic performance, and somewhat surprisingly, minority students performed better if they attended a highly selective institution rather than a nonselective one.

Close on the heels of this study of disadvantaged students was the authors' evaluation of the open admissions program at the City University of New York (CUNY) (Rossmann, Astin, Astin, & El-Khawass, 1975). Open admissions, which was implemented across the university's 15 undergraduate campuses in the fall of 1970 following a long series of protests, meant that any 1970 graduate of a New York City public high school could now be admitted to a CUNY campus. Since all new freshmen had taken basic skills tests when they finished high school, the authors were able to repeat these tests at the end of their first year to assess growth and change during the freshman year. This study yielded two key findings: that so-called remedial students do better if their classes are mainstreamed rather than offered in separate remedial tracks, and that during their first undergraduate year, these same students were able to raise their reading and math skills up to the level of their regularly admitted classmates' skills as tested when they graduated from high school. This finding clearly showed that specially admitted students, given the opportunity, are capable of college-level work. They just need extra time, combined with support services such as tutoring and academic counseling.

Another large-scale project that the authors initiated in the late 1960s involved campus protests. The authors carried out longitudinal analyses of how students and campuses were being affected by protests, as well as in-depth case studies on several campuses across the country. The results were summarized in *The Power of Protest* (A. W. Astin, H. S. Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975). One of the authors' major findings—which in part suggested the title for the book—was that many protests actually led to change on the campus, especially if they had to do with racial issues or with students' rights. Campuses implemented a number of changes in response to protests by Black students but were not as responsive to protests having to do with the Vietnam War. A finding of potential relevance to present-day racial protests is that a demonstration was most likely to end up in violence under two conditions: when the administration refused to negotiate with the protesters, and when police were brought onto the campus.

During the latter part of the 1970s and especially during the 1980s, there were a number of attempts by conservatives to outlaw affirmative action on the grounds that it discriminated against White students. One of the early pivotal events was the 1978 *Bakke* case, where a White applicant sued the University of California, claiming that he had not been accepted to medical school because he was White. In anticipation

of a ruling that might outlaw the use of race in admissions, the authors carried out a simulation study using data from UCLA's Cooperative Institutional Research Program and the College Board to see if the objective of affirmative action—to admit more underrepresented minority students—could be achieved, without relying on the student's race, through the use of a “disadvantage index,” which consisted of a weighted combination of the income and educational levels of the students' parents (A. W. Astin, Fuller, & Green 1978). As it turned out, the authors were able to show that proportionate numbers of Black and Latino applicants could be admitted by adding the disadvantage index to students' test scores and grades, although the index needed to be given substantial weight. Since the toughest barrier for minorities turned out to be standardized test scores, the index worked best when it was combined with high school grades alone, rather than with grades and test scores.

Today the college admissions battle continues to rage on in the courts, with the current conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court threatening to outlaw affirmative action altogether. A few institutions, notably the University of California, have incorporated “disadvantage” measures of various sorts into their admissions procedures. However, so far only a handful of institutions nationally have abandoned the use of test scores altogether. But an increasing number have been adopting a “test scores optional” policy, which helps to create a more level playing field for underrepresented Students of Color.

Possibly the authors' most ambitious research effort in the equity arena was their national study, *Minorities in American Higher Education* (A. W. Astin et al., 1982). The national commission that oversaw this study made a number of policy recommendations based on the authors' findings. Selective institutions, in particular, were advised to make explicit their commitment to increasing diversity by providing more support services, incorporating minority history and perspectives in the curriculum, and hiring, promoting and tenuring more minority faculty and administrators. The authors observe that while some modest progress among these lines has been made during the ensuing three decades, much more remains to be done.

Another set of recommendations concerned the manner in which standardized tests are used. All institutions were encouraged to use tests less for mere screening and selection and much more for purposes of course placement, counseling, and evaluation. As the authors have already noted, a number of colleges and universities have since then adopted a “test optional” policy, although many others appear to be relying more than ever on test scores in the admissions process. Moreover, few institutions have seen fit to employ tests in the other recommended ways.

Perhaps the most sweeping recommendations from the national commission concerned community colleges. Since these institutions, which enroll a disproportionate share of underrepresented minorities, were experiencing very high dropout rates, they were advised to encourage and facilitate full-time attendance among their traditional age students (18–22) and to establish a “college within the college” that can serve exclusively transfer students. Such a college would incorporate many of the features of four-year residential colleges that have been shown to enhance the undergraduate experience. Unfortunately, more than 30 years later, there is little evidence that these recommended structural changes have been implemented, and community colleges continue to experience very high attrition rates, especially among students from underrepresented groups.

### **Values and Character Development**

One of the most important contributions of Art Chickering's landmark study, *Education and Identity* (1969), was to underscore the fact that values and character should be at the center of efforts to educate undergraduates. Other seminal works that helped to draw the authors' attention to the affective side of

student development were *No Time for Youth* (Katz, Korn, & Ellis, 1968) and *The American College* (Sanford & Adleson, 1962).

From the very beginning of the authors' national studies of college students in the early 1960s, their surveys included a number of questions concerning students' values. When the authors initiated the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) in 1966, a number of colleagues looked at the questions that related to attitudes, values, and self-concept and wondered, "What does this have to do with undergraduate education?" But the authors persisted and, over the years, have been able to assemble a fascinating portrait of how college students' values were changing over the decades. In Fall 2015, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute will conduct the 50th annual freshman survey.

In the late 1980s, one set of trends that particularly caught the authors' attention involved the value of "developing a meaningful philosophy of life," which in the late 1960s, was endorsed as a very important or essential value by more than 80% of the entering freshmen, and "being very well off financially," which in the late '60s, was endorsed by only 40% of the freshmen. Throughout the '70s and '80s, endorsement of the "philosophy of life" value declined precipitously, while the value of "being very well off financially" soared in popularity (A. W. Astin, 1998). The authors' sense that these contrasting trends might have something to do with the advent of frequent television viewing in the American household was suggested by the fact that the trends closely paralleled trends in the number of American households that had television sets 15 years earlier, when the entering freshmen were small children. This interpretation was subsequently confirmed by longitudinal studies showing that, *during* college, excessive television viewing is associated with a strengthening of materialistic values, together with a weakening of the student's commitment to developing a philosophy of life (A. W. Astin, 1993). In the most recent Fall 2014 survey (Eagan et al., 2015), "being very well off financially" reached its all-time high rate of 82% endorsement, while "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" remains at its relatively low position in the students' hierarchy of values at 45% endorsement.

Over the years several large-scale longitudinal studies of value change during the undergraduate years have been carried out at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, the most comprehensive being *Four Critical Years* (A. W. Astin, 1977) and *What Matters in College* (A. W. Astin, 1993). While there are far too many results to summarize here, of particular relevance to this article are the findings concerning value change during college. Specifically, the college experience tends to strengthen students' social activism, feminism, environmental concerns, commitment to promoting racial understanding, and interest to developing a meaningful philosophy of life, and to weaken students' materialistic values. Most of these changes appear to be attributable to the effects of the student peer group.

## Leadership

Many studies on leadership have examined leaders' behavioral traits but have avoided the question of "leadership to what end?" Since studies of higher education governance and management had seldom, if ever, looked at learning or student development, in the late '70s, Alexander Astin and Rita Scherrei became interested in finding out if and how leadership style impacted student development. In *Maximizing Leadership Effectiveness* (A. W. Astin & Scherrei, 1980), they collected data simultaneously from administrators and students at 47 institutions to determine if a college's approach to leadership could in any way have implications for student development. As it turned out, the most favorable student outcomes were associated with a "humanistic" approach to governance, where interpersonal skills were highly valued, there was frequent communication among all constituent



groups, and the president tended to take an egalitarian approach in dealing with others. The least favorable student outcomes were associated with a “hierarchical” approach, where administrators communicated more with the president than with each other, personal ambition was rewarded, and the president’s operating style tended to be bureaucratic.

A decade later, Helen Astin and her colleague Carole Leland carried out an in depth study of 77 prominent women leaders who had been identified as instrumental in helping to bring about societal change on behalf of women. The major findings were reported in *Women of Influence, Women of Vision* (H. S. Astin & Leland, 1991). They found that the women leaders were value-driven in their leadership, were passionate about issues of justice, shared strong convictions and commitments to social justice and change, saw their leadership as a collective effort, and were very focused on their goals. In other words, leaders of social change emphasize collective action, share power, and have a passionate commitment to social justice, equality, and inclusion.

In 1993, the two authors relied heavily on this early work in joining together to develop the *Social Change Model of Student Leadership Development* (A. W. Astin & H. S. Astin, 1996). Crafted in collaboration with a “working ensemble” of leadership experts from the field of student affairs, the Social Change Model was entirely value-based.

The authors are gratified that the model has generated a lot of interest over the years and, with further leadership from experts such as Susan Komives (Komives & Lucas, 2013; Komives & Wagner, 2009), it continues to be used in leadership training on many campuses across the country 19 years after it was released.

### **Service Learning and Civic Engagement**

One of the most significant developments in higher education during the 1980s was the growth of interest in service learning and civic responsibility. In recognition of the importance of engaging students in service work, in 1985, the presidents of Stanford, Brown, and Georgetown universities joined together with the chair of the Commission of the States to form the Campus Compact, a coalition of college presidents who committed their institutions to promoting student involvement in community service. The compact has now grown to more than 1,100 members.

Perhaps no one has written more about civic engagement and higher education than Tom Ehrlich and his colleague Anne Colby. Ehrlich’s (2000) initial book in a series, *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, was followed by Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens’s (2003) *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. In a chapter prepared for Ehrlich’s (2000) book, Alexander Astin argued that higher education’s greatest “civic challenge” is the education of the underprepared student (A. W. Astin, 2000). Another pioneering work in this field was the monograph series, published by the American Association of Higher Education, showing how service learning can be introduced into academic courses in 22 different fields (Zlotkowski, 1997–2002).

During the early 1980s the Higher Education Research Institute became involved in a series of large scale studies designed to assess how and why college students become involved in service work, and what impact service involvement has on the student’s development. Participation in community service during college turns out to have positive impacts on more student outcomes than almost any other curricular or co-curricular experience that the authors have been able to study (A. W. Astin & Sax, 1998).

The authors have also done several studies on faculty attitudes and involvement in service, which showed, among other things, that Faculty of Color and women faculty are especially likely to incorporate service learning into their courses (Antonio, H. S. Astin, & Cress, 2000).

Participation in service learning also turns out to have positive impacts on a wide range of post-college student outcomes. Compared to their classmates, alumni who had a service-learning experience show substantially higher levels of civic engagement and value change after they leave college. These differences show up not only in behaviors such as voting, donating money to charity, and working with others to solve community problems but also in their attitudes and beliefs: Alumni who participated in service learning as undergraduates show greater commitment to values such as becoming a community leader, promoting political and social change, and working to promote racial understanding. At the same time, the service participants are more likely than non-participants to believe that their undergraduate education has prepared them well for life after college (A. W. Astin & Vogelgesang, 2006).

### Spirituality

The authors' interest in spirituality was stimulated in part by their participation in retreats hosted by the Fetzer Institute during the late 1990s, and by their subsequent affiliation with a small group of retreat participants who continued meeting well into the 2000s. These sessions convinced the authors that it was time for higher education to give more attention to the "inner lives" of students, faculty, and staff in higher education.

The authors' first research effort in this area involved in-depth personal interviews with faculty in four diverse California institutions, which culminated in a monograph, *Meaning and Spirituality in the Lives of College Faculty: A Study of Values, Authenticity, and Stress* (A. W. Astin, H. S. Astin, Antonio, J. S. Astin, & Cress, 1999). What surprised the authors was that over 95% of faculty interviewed were able to talk freely about spiritual issues in their lives, even though their institutions rarely offered opportunities to explore such issues.

It was in the early 2000s that interest in spirituality within the higher education community began to show significant growth. In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities hosted a national conference on "Spirituality and Learning," and shortly thereafter two members of the authors' small spirituality group, Jon Dalton and Art Chickering, together with their colleague Lisa Stamm, published *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005). Among many other important features, their comprehensive volume integrated historical and cultural perspectives with practical advice about how to reshape institutional programs to give greater attention to the spiritual dimension of the student experience.

In 2003 the Templeton Foundation awarded the authors a grant to initiate a large-scale longitudinal study of students' spiritual development, which culminated in the publication of *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (A. W. Astin, H. S. Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). This eight-year study, which the authors reported on at the 2010 Dalton Institute, not only underscores the importance of spirituality in the lives of college students but also demonstrates the close connections among the topics that the authors have attempted to cover in this article: Values and character, equity, service and civic responsibility, leadership, and spiritual development.

In order to share a few examples of these connections, the authors first need to review briefly the five dimensions of spirituality for which they developed measures in their study: *Spiritual quest* reflects the degree to which the student is actively seeking to become a more self-aware and enlightened person and to find answers to life's mysteries and "big questions." *Equanimity* measures the extent to which the student is able to find meaning in times of hardship, feels at peace, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the



direction of her life. *Charitable Involvement* is a behavioral measure that includes activities such as participating in community service, donating money to charity, and helping friends with personal problems. *Ethic of caring* reflects the student's commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, and promoting racial understanding. *Ecumenical worldview* indicates the extent to which the student is interested in different religious traditions, seeks to understand other countries and cultures, feels a strong connection to all humanity, and believes that all life is interconnected.

Findings from this study clearly illustrate how the student's spiritual life reflects each of the other four topics that the authors have covered in this article, and in particular how the issue of equity is connected to character, leadership, service, and spirituality. When it comes to service and civic responsibility, it turns out that when students participate in service learning during the undergraduate years, they show greater-than-average growth in three of the five spiritual qualities: equanimity, spiritual quest, and ecumenical worldview. Similarly, participation in leadership training during the undergraduate years also enhances growth in three of the spiritual qualities: equanimity, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. Moreover, growth in equanimity enhances students' leadership self-concept. And when it comes to spiritual growth and character development, growth in charitable involvement during college strengthens a number of equity-related values, including "helping others in difficulty," "reducing pain and suffering in the world," "improving the human condition," "accepting others as they are," and "believing in the goodness of all people."

While a considerable body of earlier research had shown that the use of reflection is a key element in an effective service learning experience, the authors' spirituality study also showed that reflection and meditation are perhaps the most powerful means for promoting students' spiritual development. When it comes to the question of how higher education can directly promote the cause of educational equity, another one of the authors' spiritual qualities—ecumenical worldview—takes on special significance. The authors' data show that when students' ecumenical worldview shows substantial growth during the college years, their commitment to "promoting racial understanding" is strengthened, and they feel more confident in their "ability to get along with other races and cultures."

## Conclusion

In reflecting on the topic of this year's Dalton Institute, the two authors have come to the conclusion that since the structural barriers that stand in the way of achieving greater equity for students—a hierarchical system of institutions, the continuing heavy reliance on standardized test scores, diminishing state support for public institutions, to name just a few—show little sign of changing, it makes little sense to continue focusing our current energies on trying to change these structures.

If anything, current trends seem to be headed in the opposite direction. The hierarchical arrangement of institutions shows little evidence of change, as competition for admission to a "good" college becomes more intense than ever, with substantial industries having sprung up to assist students from affluent families to improve their standardized test scores and gain admission to a highly selective college. And to accommodate the expected increases in enrollments in public institutions, many policymakers are claiming that traditional forms of liberal learning are "too expensive," and are instead advocating much greater use of MOOCs and other forms of distance learning.

If these policymakers have their way, we can be sure that a disproportionate number of those who will be deprived of the unique benefits of a traditional liberal education will be poor students, first-

generation students, underprepared students, and students from underrepresented minority groups. If it comes to pass, such a scenario is bound to exacerbate already-existing inequities.

Furthermore, as the authors complete this article, the federal government is planning to implement a “college rating” system that threatens to punish institutions that enroll high-risk students by judging institutional “performance” on the basis of “outcomes” such as degree completion rates and employment earnings. Without adequate controls for relevant student “inputs,” such a rating system will inevitably favor selective institutions, which enroll disproportionate numbers of well-prepared students from highly educated and affluent families.

The authors believe that the research that they have reviewed in this article points in an entirely different direction, one that promotes equity in a way that is much more amenable to the direct efforts of those of us who work in the higher education field. The authors are speaking here of the manner in which we educate our students, since it is the students who are destined to become the next generation of leaders, public servants, and engaged citizens. How *they* view the issues of economic, racial, and educational equity is what will eventually shape the policies that can address the structural problems that continue to stand in the way of achieving greater educational equity. And it is our higher education institutions that can help to shape the character and develop the leadership qualities of these same future leaders and citizens.

What the authors are really suggesting is that the greatest contribution that those who work in higher education can make to the cause of equity may well reside at the level of the individual student. By working to enhance students’ spiritual and moral growth, we can help create a new generation who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice than previous generations, while also enabling students to respond to the many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing society with a greater sense of equanimity.

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