

THIS JUST IN: THE MYSTERY OF STUDENT NO. 32,355

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Student No. 32,355, all things considered, is a fairly typical Frosh I. Happy about going to college, but somewhat apprehensive, and not merely because home is nine counties away from Northridge. No. 32,355 arrived with an intellectual suitcase in some disarray: a 3.38 high school grade average that seemed to indicate good preparation, but a Verbal SAT of 370, and EPT/ELM scores that required all four remedial courses.

No. 32,355 was typically uncertain about what courses to take, and particularly uninformed about courses that might not augur well for success, given the mixed academic indicators. Advisement with the college of choice took place on the phone. No. 32,355 had searched independently for courses of interest, without understanding the course numbering system or the concept of class level, or the idea of logical prerequisites. One 400-level course seemed interesting. The counselor approved No. 32,355's program, including the 400-level course, and released the advisement hold.

No. 32,355 thus embarked upon a 12-unit university experience with a strange configuration: Remedial Reading; Remedial Math; a three-unit, six-hour, lower division, non-GE, creative performance class designed for majors far different than No. 32,355's stated choice; and a 400-level non-GE course with expectations well beyond No. 32,355's credentials.

The second week revealed one sign of impending danger in this program: the 400-level course had a fifteen-minute essay quiz on that week's 25-page reading assignment, specifically designed to identify potential problems early. No. 32,355 failed. While recording grades, the professor noted the student's Freshman status. A private after-class conversation revealed the circumstances. No. 32,355 quickly agreed that withdrawal was indicated.

The story of No. 32,355 illuminates a labyrinth of mysteries.

How is it that a new Freshman is allowed to register without the faintest idea of the class numbering system, the concept of academic class levels, the difference between upper and lower division?

How is it that a college counselor approves freshman enrollment in a 400-level course in violation of the clear catalog description of appropriate grade levels for 300- and 400-level courses?

How is it that both student and counselor think enrollment in a lower-division creative performance class is appropriate when the catalog description clearly indicates otherwise? If catalog descriptions are irrelevant for freshman course selection, when do they become relevant? Why do curriculum committees spend hours dickering over them?

How is it that a new student, and one, indeed, with serious academic deficiencies, is allowed to cruise the schedule of classes for courses of interest, without any idea of how each course selected should form a part of a comprehensive whole?

Did either, or both, of the upper division selections reflect No. 32,355's affinities or enjoyments from high school? If so, have we, in the advisement of Freshmen, drifted into an unfortunate imbalance between what students like and what we as professionals should know they need or ought to avoid?

It is not known whether No. 32,355's college advisor also has teaching duties. But in light of the previous question, has the institutional separation of advisement from teaching vitiated the effectiveness of individual advisement generally, even though it has made more uniform the presentation of rules?

Why do we allow students who require all four remedial courses to take any mainline GE or major courses before the remedial work is completed? Does this not send students the message that the deficiencies are really not so serious after all?

Further, how is it possible for Freshmen to get A and B grades in GE courses that logically should require collegiate level reading, in the same semester they are taking Remedial Reading?

How often, in the advisement of students, do we continue to accept high school grade averages as reliable predictors of collegiate success, even in the face of clear warning signs in SAT scores and our own EPT results? Or perhaps we suppose that grade inflation and manipulation does not exist in high schools?

Have we tried to develop any qualitative definitions of "student success," or must we continue to labor in the dictatorship of the decimal point, where retention rates, graduation rates, and percentages and institutional rankings of all sorts define our tasks and the speed of their completion?

Or . . . perhaps the real mystery of Student No. 32,355 is this: are we simply trying to do too much, too fast, too cheaply, for too many students with too many deficiencies -- and all this with too few appropriate classrooms and too few faculty and staff to do the job the way it needs to be done?

And if so, why?