

Unhappiness in our premier institutes

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This article was published by The Indian Express with the title “The troubled campus.”

Several recent student suicides in premier institutes have pointed to an underlying problem that requires attention. Each such student suicide is a tragedy. A recent article covered steps being taken in IIT Delhi to help students who may be “academically adrift.”

Institutes try to help in various ways: student volunteers who watch for troubled students; counsellors and psychiatrists who help troubled students; extensions granted to students for their degree completion; tutoring for troubled students; sometimes allowing close relatives to stay in campus; and lowering graduation requirements (e.g., from a GPA of 5 to 4). But these steps address the symptom, not the cause.

Let me offer an analogy. Suppose heart disease becomes common in a country. We must surely open new cardiology units in more hospitals. But we can also act more broadly: what lifestyle issues, dietary habits, environmental pollutants, stressful circumstances, exercise profiles, etc., cause the heart disease?

Behind the small percentage of suicides, which are terrible, there is a broader range of less extreme unhappiness. The entire system is troubled.

In the public consciousness, IITs are famous for jobs, not for education. The press reports astronomical starting salaries, not excellent teaching. Parents of potential students seem blind to the hard statistical truth: only a tiny percentage of JEE candidates will get in, and only a tiny fraction of *those* will earn the astronomical salaries. A direct consequence of this apparent blindness is the extreme competition to get in.

The competition takes a toll. Many students enter coaching centers at a tender age. Away from their families, they are insulated from some aspects of family life. Away from general society, they are insulated from some aspects of social life. They are surrounded by competitors rather than friends. They are taught only one measure of worth, namely success on the entrance exam. Their coaching years, spanning their early teens, keep them isolated from social and moral aspects of cause and effect, from the give and take of human relations, and even from the idea that there may be other ways of measuring human value.

Do a thought experiment. Suppose, hypothetically, that the JEE decides to reward candidates with a social conscience. That social conscience is to be demonstrated through something selfless, namely donating blood. And so, imagine that any candidate who donated one liter of blood in the previous year will receive five extra marks on the JEE. I think our blood banks will be full.

Why do parents put their children through this brutalization that masquerades as academics? Because no other stream and college offers such an early guarantee of a reasonable career outcome. That is the reality of our external world.

Consequently, many of our undergraduate students are unhappy. How could they not be? They spend their early teens being soldiers instead of adolescents, dreaming typically of “computer science at IIT Bombay” followed by “one crore plus”. If they end up studying, e.g., mechanical engineering at IIT Kanpur (my academic home), they think they have *failed*. They face subjects developed by giants like Gauss and Newton and Euler, and they realize that their JEE training has taught them *very little*. They realize that their starting salary is likely to be *far below* their initial dreams. Moreover, within the IIT system, they become *average*. Their *parents* usually understand little beyond comparing starting salaries. And their *seniors*, with no career experience, tell them to deemphasize the traditional subjects, to learn coding, and to seek “positions of responsibility” in student festivals. Their *placement office* ranks potential employers based solely on the starting salary. And finally, news filters back from recent graduates about the jobs being boring, and people in their forties being laid off.

Now consider our postgraduate students. Those often come from smaller colleges, having been even less successful in the JEE race; and are often at a disadvantage when they take tough courses alongside our undergraduates. Their placement prospects are poorer, too. So, they too are unhappy. Our incoming PhD students often have poor research preparation, think the PhD is a “course,” and face their own set of troubles within our imperfect system.

All in all, the unhappiness in our premier institutes is largely a consequence of known circumstances, some of which can be fixed. We must help parents, students, and the world in general understand what an IITian’s realistic prospects are, and what a career can be.

We must engage with the press to describe actual careers and cut the hype. We must engage with parents to help them understand more. We must have career offices, not placement offices. We must have smaller classrooms, where teachers know individual students again. We must have kind and wise adults in campus whom the students can chat with: such adults are rarer now because faculty members are under increasing pressure to get grants, guide PhDs, and publish research. We must find tutors for troubled undergraduate students not from other undergraduates, but from senior PhD students who tutor students in small groups. We might (dare I say it?) restrict student festivals to a smaller number of music concerts per year, and instead have more locations and time slots for general technical discussions with tutors where, perhaps, light snacks and soft drinks are provided.

The institute is a place of learning, not a placement agency. When expectations are realistic, when viable alternatives are recognized and valued, and when our stakeholders have more faith in education itself, perhaps the unhappiness in our campuses can begin to fade.

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