

Triple Standards

Picture Main St. in Pleasantville, USA. There is a Main Street Gym that has weights, machines, and lots of exercise classes, a Main Street Dojo that teaches karate, and at the end of the street, there is Pleasantville Junior College that tries to place its students in good jobs or institutes of higher learning.

When you visit the gym, you can pay for a single session or for a membership. That membership allows you to workout anytime you want, but no one there will counsel you on diet, design your workouts, or train you. There is no ranking or special notoriety. In essence, you are simply renting time, so you are there to do whatever you want to do with the facilities provided.

At the dojo, you can pay a mat fee to work out if you are an experienced martial artist of a similar system, or you can pay for a membership. Theoretically, you file an application in order to enter, but you will almost always be accepted. That membership allows you access only to certain classes, but in each class you will be taught according to your level of development. Self-training is allowed only when the dojo is open but is not running a class. When you are considered good enough, you can take an exam, you may be awarded a rank, and that award may allow you to enter a higher-level class.

At the junior college, you apply for admission. Often you will be accepted, but there is a possibility that the enrollment is full or that you do not fit into the school's academic trajectory, e.g. you want to study agriculture and the school has only biology courses. In the adjoining city, there is a four-year college that works much like the junior college, but its admission standards are stricter. Once enrolled, you must maintain a certain grade level each year to be promoted to the next level of study.

In other words, there are three standards by which people who join an institute of self-improvement are judged. Does this make sense? To me, the Let-them-work-on-themselves approach of the gym makes perfect sense: open to all, no promises made, no awards given. The college approach makes sense: if we are expected to educate you to graduation, we have to start with some recognizable qualities—our restricted admissions get a step up on a successful graduation. What seems to make no sense is the middle ground, the martial arts school's No-admission-standards-but-we'll-make-you-into-a-black-belt approach. It assumes that everyone has what it takes to become a black belt so that no admissions standards are necessary.

Many years ago at a party, I was discussing teaching kids with a Little League baseball coach who was bemoaning the idea that he had to work with less than athletic “athletes” whose families expected him to provide a winning season for his team. “You know what that's like,” he said.

“Well, sort of. I know there are parents who want their kids to be black belts within a couple of years, but I make it clear that is unlikely to happen.”

“But you must get frustrated if there are no try-outs. How can you be expected to produce good athletes?”

“No, sorry, I don't,” I responded. “It's not so much their innate athletic ability we depend upon, but their willingness to improve.”

“But certainly, you would be more successful if all your students had some innate ability to begin with.”

“I don’t think so. In the martial arts, we simply work with them until they get better, and for as long as they want to get better.” At that moment I realized that the No-admission-standards-but-we’ll-make-you-into-a-black-belt approach made *perfect* sense.

Sure, dojo are like gyms in some regard—we do want to build the body; and, dojo are like colleges in some regard—we do want to build the mind. We may even want to have an admission process by which we discover if the dojo is right for the student (see the previous installment, *Motivational Maps*), but we don’t want to restrict students who sincerely want to improve themselves. Instead, we take on the challenge of helping them to exactly that—sort of half way down Main St. between the gym and the junior college.