What Happened to John T. Mongan?

They say all roads invariably lead to Rome (and not necessarily to MIT) but can all roads lead to a capable, qualified engineer?

BRIAN BRENNER

This is a tale of two letters. The first was sent by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) admissions office to attract high school students to attend the institute. The second letter was a response by one of those prospective students, John T. Mongan.

Letter #1

April 14, 1994

Mr. John T. Mongan
123 Main Street
Smalltown, California 94123-4567

Dear John:

You've got the grades. You've certainly got the PSAT scores. And now you've got a letter from MIT. Maybe you're surprised. Most students would be.

But you're not most students. And that's exactly why I urge you to consider carefully one of the most selective universities in America.

The level of potential reflected in your performance is a powerful indicator that you might well be an excellent candidate for MIT. It certainly got my attention!

Engineering's not for you? No problem. It may surprise you to learn we offer more than 40 major fields of study, from architecture to brain and cognitive sciences, from economics (perhaps the best program in the country) to writing.

What? Of course, you don't want to be bored. Who does? Life here *is* tough *and* demanding, but it's also *fun*. MIT students are imaginative and creative — inside and outside the classroom.

You're interested in athletics? Great! MIT has more varsity teams — 39 — than almost any other university, and a tremendous intramural program so everybody can participate.

You think we're too expensive? Don't be too sure. We've got surprises for you there, too.

Why not send the enclosed Information Request to find out more about this unique institution? Why not do it right now?

Sincerely,
Michael C. Behnke,
Director of Admissions

P.S. — If you'd like a copy of a fun-filled, fact-filled brochure, "Insight," just check the appropriate box on the form.

Letter #2

May 5, 1994

Michael C. Behnke
MIT Director of Admissions
Office of Admissions, Room 3-108
Cambridge MA 02139-4307

Dear Michael:

You've got the reputation. You've certainly got the pomposity. And now you've got a letter from John Mongan. Maybe you're surprised. Most universities would be.

But you're not most universities. And that's exactly why I urge you to carefully consider one of the most selective students in America, so selective that he will choose only *one* of the thousands of accredited universities in the country.

The level of pomposity and lack of tact reflected in your letter is a powerful indicator that your august institution might well be a possibility for John Mongan's future education. It certainly got my attention!

Don't want Bio-Chem students? No problem. It may surprise you to learn that my interests cover over 400 fields of study, from semantics to limnology, from object-oriented programming (perhaps one of the youngest professionals in the country) to classical piano.

What? Of course you don't want egotistical jerks. Who does? I *am* self-indulgent *and* overconfident, but I'm also amusing. John Mongan is funny and amusing — whether you're laughing with him or at him.

You're interested in athletes? Great! John Mongan has played more sports — 47 — than almost any other student, including oddball favorites such as Orienteering.

You think I can pay for your school? Don't be too sure. I've got surprises for you there, too.

Why not send a guaranteed admission and full scholarship to increase your chance of being selected by John Mongan? Why not do it right now?

Sincerely,
John Mongan

P.S. — If you'd like a copy of a fun-filled, fact-filled brochure, "John Mongan: What a Guy!" just ask.

Copies of these letters have been making the rounds on the Internet for years. When I have been invited to give presentations to MIT classes and functions, what better way is there than to start a talk by reading them? But I needed to know for sure if these letters were real or not. Who was John T. Mongan? Some research was required.

A Real Personality

As far as I can tell, John T. Mongan is a real person. Apparently, he did not end up going to MIT. He never applied, which is a pity, because it would have been entertaining to see how his application would be received. Instead, Mongan went to Stanford, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry. He learned some programming and worked as a consultant for Autodesk in 2000. Mongan even co-authored a book, *Programming Interviews Exposed: Secrets to Landing Your Next Job* (which has sold over 30,000 copies). After working at Autodesk, he planned to attend medical school, but at this point, my research trail went cold and I could find no additional information.

For this discussion, the story of John T. Mongan could stop here. We are indebted to him, via the Internet, for his unique contribution to the literature of college application letters. In reading the documents, it's not clear that MIT's admissions officer was serious in his original letter to the high school students. Some references suggested that the MIT admissions office attempted to write the original letter as "non-stuffy" and off-the-wall

way of getting high school students' attention. If that is true, then the letter surely must have succeeded. In the crowded marketplace of bland, wholesome college brochures, Michael Behnke's letter used a slightly different approach. It certainly got my attention. The spin from MIT was that its letter was a parody of the admissions solicitation genre, and that perhaps Mongan took it a little bit too seriously.

A Twist

But the sequence of letters from 1994 takes on new resonance considering what happened to the MIT Dean of Admissions. In 2007, word was leaked to the press that the current Dean, who had been hired ten years before, had been unclear about her qualifications. Apparently, she did not attend the colleges that she listed on her resume.

By all accounts, the MIT Dean of Admissions was superb at her job. She was a national leader in a reform movement aimed reexamining the hypercompetitive environment of college admissions. Especially for extremely selective schools, the college admission process had increasingly become an intense, nerve-wracking, high-stakes beauty pageant. Winning candidates needed to have perfect SAT scores, varsity letters in six sports and a resume full of extra-curricular activities that needed to demonstrate increasing levels of responsibility and decreasing levels of daily sleep. The MIT Dean tried to temper the process, adding items to the admissions sheet such as a question to students to write about what excited them in life. Her goal was to try to develop a process that evaluated the whole student as a young human being, and not as a collection of accolades.

Credentials, Credentials, Credentials

The Dean's fate was ironic, it that she was deposed by a process she tried to reform. In requiring the Dean's resignation, MIT was placed in a tough position and arrived at a difficult, but ultimately correct, decision. Yet the process calls into question the meaning, and importance, of prerequisites and qualifications. What happened to the MIT Dean presents a cautionary tale for the rest of us, particularly engineers. Led by ASCE, civil engineers are engaged in a wide-ranging debate about what qualifies a person to be an engineer. The ASCE Body of Knowledge (BOK) committee has taken on the difficult task of defining the "Body of Knowledge" — the accumulated information — that qualifies an individual to be a responsible civil engineer. This task is not an easy one because the world is vast and the amount of appropriate knowledge is seemingly endless.

To Embody Knowledge

To practice as a civil engineer depends on mastering a complex suite of skills, knowledge and background, both technical and non-technical. When analyzing, designing and constructing a bridge, for example, engineers have to be well-versed in thousands of details for analysis, modeling, drawing, communicating with the client, scheduling and estimating, as well as many other skills. The engineer must also exercise these skills competently in a competitive environment where representatives of different disciplines and participants are vying for limited resources under tight constraints.

Ending up with a good bridge is tough enough. But how should society measure whether or not one is qualified to be a bridge engineer? After the ASCE committee has defined BOK, then it has to be validated and measured. Engineers have agreed-upon tools for doing so, such as the accreditation process for university engineering programs, and the Engineer in Training (EIT) and Professional Engineer (PE) exams.

However, the accreditation process has become more of a performance specification and less prescribed over time. In addition, the rigid examination process, as represented by the EIT and PE exams, is being increasingly challenged by those who feel that exams do not measure the whole student or that the exams have an inherent bias. In a way, these are two sides of the same coin. There is no argument on the goal of having experienced, capable engineers. Yet no one wants to say, in any detail, what are the right means to achieve this lofty and beneficial goal. The thinking is

that as long as the destination is reached, it is better to provide as much flexibility as possible for selecting the route and mode of transport. But what if people get lost or their vehicle breaks down?

I wondered what John T. Mongan thought about all this. How should we measure qualifications? Should it be prescribed or performance specifications? How do we know for sure that an engineer is ready to engineer? John would know what to do.

So I wrote him a letter:

Dear John,

You've got the book. You've got the knowledge. And now you've got a letter from Brian R. Brenner. Maybe you're surprised. Most engineers would be.

But you're not like most engineers. And that's exactly why I urge you to consider carefully one of the most challenging engineering questions of our time: determining how to measure and validate qualifications.

The level of potential reflected in your response to MIT as a high school student is a powerful indicator that you might well be an excellent candidate to interact with Brian R. Brenner. It certainly got my attention!

Civil engineering's not for you? No problem. It may surprise you to learn that determining engineering qualifications in our increasingly complex world is important to more than 40 major fields of study, from mechanical engineering to biomedical, from economics to such oddball favorites as computer programming.

What? Of course, you don't want to be bored. Who does? Figuring out who is qualified as an engineer *is* tough *and* demanding, but it's also *fun*. Well, maybe it's not fun.

You're interested in athletics? You're an engineer?

You think engineers get paid enough? Don't be too sure. We've got surprises for you there, too.

Why not respond to Brian R. Brenner to interact with him on this challenging topic? Why not do it right now?

Sincerely,
Brian R. Brenner, Famous Civil
Engineering Author and a Legend
(in his own mind)

Here is Mr. Mongan's response. . .

BRIAN R. BRENNER *is an Associate with Fay, Spofford & Thorndike in Burlington, Mass. He also teaches engineering classes at Tufts University. He served as Chair of the editorial board for* Civil Engineering Practice *for seven years.*

REFERENCE

The original Mongan letter can be found in numerous places on the World Wide Web. Two such places are: www.jr.co.il/humor/mit.txt and www.netfunny.com/rhf/jokes/95q4/mongan.html.