ly refreshing to see this insight celebrated at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) in its recent “Fail Week.”

The first type of problem, the “accountability” one, is forced by the first type, is the cornerstone of Singapore’s meritocracy. That meritocracy is aden- bly in many ways and responsible for much of the Republic’s suc- cess. Yet in addition to rewarding ability, it also punishes mistakes. Singaporean students are nothing if not responsive to incen- tives. They quickly learn that they must work hard and hone their skills. They also gravitate towards areas where success can be an objec- tive certainty rather than a gamble. I’ve always thought, for exam- ple, by the number of students aspiring to study law who choose mathematics over history, or sci- ences over politics. The result is that many of Sin- gapore’s highest achieving stu- dents are exceptionally compe- tent, ranked among the best in the world – but also a little narrow and very risk-averse.

On failure and success

AS PART of orientation activities last week, I had the pleasure of welcom- ing 260 incoming stu- dents to the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law. These incredibly talented young men and women have worked hard – and often their parents have worked hard – to get into this great school. Yet it had to warn them that the next four years would be very dif- ferent from their education to date.

Until now, much of their education was built around being posed questions to which there was a single answer, taught by teachers who knew what that answer was. Extra tuition and parental support ensured that they could provide an answer in exam conditions. These skills are of limited value in law school – or in life – where there is normally more than one possible answer. And although a law professor probably has an opinion on the matter, he or she is usually looking more for strong ar- guments in support of an answer rather than the answer itself.

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One might be overconvinced that success is not a GEP teacher as he had claimed. This is, of course, just the tip of Singapore’s billions-dollar tuition iceberg. Whether that money is well spent, and whether it sug- gests deficiencies in the primary and secondary school system, are important issues. As these students enter univer- sity, they are likely to be faced with other types of problem areas.

The first is that students who have been groomed for success in narrow fields may not find success and take it for granted. As a result, they may be overconvinced that attributes that are less important than their mark. The ability to do well in tests is a poor predictor for achievement in other areas. These skills are of limited value in law school – or in life – where there is normally more than one possible answer. And although a law professor probably has an opinion on the matter, he or she is usually looking more for strong ar- guments in support of an answer rather than the answer itself.

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