

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
COLLEGE ADMISSIONS: WHAT ARE STUDENTS LEARNING?

An exploration of how the selective college admission experience is shaping
student attitudes and behaviors by the Education Conservancy
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Background

The college admissions environment has changed significantly during the past twenty years: more stakeholders, more marketing, more applications, more money, more emphasis, more testing, more activity, and more confusion. Amid this new landscape, there is growing concern that individual institutional actions, as well as the related activities of parents, schools, students, and other actors in what we refer to as the *admissions process*, may not be serving the values and purposes traditionally associated with higher education. The college admissions process has been studied extensively from a marketing perspective—how students choose the colleges to which they apply and eventually enroll. Some attention has been given to the psychological aspects of the process—especially the accompanying stress and confusion experienced during the decision making process. However, the admissions process is a singular developmental event when many students, especially those who are involved in selective admissions, prepare to leave their families to enter adult life. Greater understanding is needed of the educational impact on students of this formative experience.

Project Description

The goal of this research project is to gain insight into student experiences with selective college admissions. We wanted to learn whether student attitudes and behaviors are being shaped in ways that: 1) warrant a larger study to more fully understand the identified issues; and 2) suggest remedial action on the part of colleges is needed. By questioning students in eight focus groups drawn from a regionally diverse mix of private and public high schools within the United States, we explored student experiences and learning during selective college admissions. Our research objectives were to answer the following questions about the admission process for high achieving students:

- What are students hearing? Where is the information coming from?
- What are students doing to enhance their probabilities of gaining admission?
- Is the admissions process a positive or negative experience for students?
- What are students learning about themselves, higher education, and society during the admissions process?
- What would be helpful to students? What would they like to change?

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this project. As an exploratory, focus-group based, qualitative effort of limited scope, our findings should not be considered conclusive. We used tools of qualitative research, and we were guided by professional experiences, sensitivities, and instincts to ask questions, listen, sort and discuss student

responses, and identify and weigh themes. We made every attempt to maximize the degree of objectivity by involving many thoughtful minds in the careful crafting of our research protocol and by diversifying the number of qualified eyes and ears the information passed through. With that caveat, we can say that our findings seem to suggest certain conclusions; they illuminate problems and possibilities that need additional attention, and suggest the conclusion that remedial action is both necessary and possible.

A sample of our findings:

1. Students dislike disingenuous college recruiting. Generic marketing materials, college fairs, and information sessions are unappealing and too much like sales pitches. They dislike being encouraged to apply to a college even when they have no chance at admission. They feel that often schools are simply trying to serve themselves by courting students' money (application fees) and applications (only to reject them). They resent being targeted by colleges inappropriately early.
2. Students would like to take more courses that interest them, but feel that it is a gamble to pursue their true interests.
3. Students feel pressured to do things for the sole purpose of gaining admission, such as participating in extracurricular activities, taking multiple AP or IB courses, engaging in various forms of SAT preparation. Students feel it is impossible to be everything colleges would like them to be.
4. Students receive conflicting messages from colleges. Colleges say they want well-rounded students, which is discouraging for many students with concentrated passions or unique qualities. Colleges also seem to expect students to know their majors and life goals.
5. Colleges say they are unique, but they all sound the same to many students.
6. Students feel like they should be able to fill out all the spaces on the application for extracurricular activities. The number of activities appears to be more important than the depth of involvement.
7. Students believe that colleges cannot and do not judge applicants in a fair and objective way.
8. Students agree that too much emphasis is placed on attending a prestigious college but admit that the prestige of a college does matter to them. They believe if they go to a better college they will get a better job and have more success in life.
9. Although students believe that the advantage of legacy connections are "just part of life," they feel that a student should not be defined by what his/her parents have done but rather by what they themselves have done.

10. The college application process helped high school students become better at planning, organizing paperwork, time management, and balancing school with extracurricular activities.
11. The college application process also helped students learn about themselves and develop a sense of independence. For some it was a lesson in humility, learning that they were not as unique as they had thought they were.
12. Some students feel they need to misrepresent themselves because they believe they are not good enough and that cheating is an inevitable result of intense competition.
13. Students are keenly aware of the advantages possessed by students from higher income families.
14. Private school students recognized the advantage they have over students at public schools because of their wealthier family backgrounds, legacies at some institutions, and having access to more resources, like SAT preparation.
15. Private school students found SAT tutoring helpful but questioned its fairness because they knew that they were paying to raise their scores and increase their probabilities of gaining admission.
16. Private school students were less critical of dishonesty and cheating than were public school students, believing that it is just part of the game.
17. Students also wanted to know the importance of essay question responses, SAT scores, AP classes, and if they were really supposed to decide on a major and know their goals for their future before finishing high school.
18. Students would like to have honest, straightforward information about application criteria from admissions personnel. Students were unsure of what colleges are really looking for and felt that colleges should be more upfront.
19. Students were frustrated with having a goal (first choice college) but being uncertain of exactly how to achieve that goal. They wanted to know what it really takes to get into a particular college.
20. Students experienced extreme stress due to the college application process. Worrying, emotional instability, sleeping problems, eating problems, and a variety of physical symptoms due to those stressors were commonly reported.

Analysis

Selective college admissions is a significantly formative event. That is, students learn many things about themselves and society during the college admission process; their attitudes and behaviors are shaped in significant ways. The process affords students the

opportunity to confront fundamental social values and choices (the value of various types of endeavors: intellectual, athletic, artistic, service, immediate versus deferred gratification, self vs. societal interests, honesty, etc.) and to learn about essential social institutions (families, schools, peer groups, social networks) and society (social processes and norms such as fairness and justice). Much positive personal development occurs: self examination, self understanding and self-presentation skills, and a sense of authenticity; responsibility and independence; organizational and time management skills; and how to search for, process, and evaluate information. Some learning about society and social institutions also occurs: an understanding of competition and competitiveness, luck, fate, or God's will in getting ahead; the power that institutions have in allocating desirable resources and opportunities; how institutions serve their own interests; how complex phenomena are reduced to simplified, and sometimes simplistic, indicators.

Some learning that results from this process appears to produce undesirable effects—hypocrisy, lying, cheating, and cynicism about education, social institutions, and social processes. Students can learn to be cynical, and even distrustful, of social institutions that they see as self-serving and dishonest. In turn, they can learn to engage in self-serving, hypocritical, inauthentic behavior themselves—for example, perfunctory participation in activities in order to pad admission applications. Some learn or refine their capacities to exaggerate or lie about what they have done or to cheat on activities such as tests. While some of the negative learning may simply be accurate reflections of the realities of human nature and social institutions, it is abundantly clear that the students we interviewed perceive a fundamental disconnect between their hopes and expectations about higher education and the behaviors and signals of colleges in the admissions process. This disconnect contributes to cynicism and undesirable behavior on the part of students and leads students to become disillusioned about education.

One of the most problematic aspects of the college admissions process appears to be the marketing activities of colleges. College marketing is viewed by students not only as self-serving, but as deceptive, and often inconsistent with how students think colleges should act. Wide spread marketing messages that, “we are the best and the best for you” appear implausible to students. The marketing activity and rhetoric employed by colleges contributes to both healthy skepticism, but also to cynicism, distrust, and unethical behavior.

The college admissions process is not viewed as fair by many students. They see the evidence of class and racial privilege, as well as the role of connections, special interests, and talent. They see a lack of connection between the value of hard work and dedication and the particular ways in which admissions decision are made (what characteristics are rewarded). A most striking area of concern is the unjustified importance of the SAT. The SAT appears to contribute to both cynicism about institutions and acceptance of some types of cheating, called by one student, “equal opportunity cheating.” Students believe the SAT plays a significant role in college admissions that is patently unfair. They do not understand how four hours of testing, which they believe can be improved by coaching that focuses on strategy and gamesmanship, can be anywhere near as

appropriate to assessing potential for success in college and later in life as four years of education and the effort it requires to succeed in high school..

Conclusions

Students learn many things about themselves and society during the selective college admissions process. The behavior of colleges, individually and collectively, has a profound impact on what students learn. Some of these impacts do not serve the developmental needs of students, and some may produce adverse effects for society.

We need to learn more about the breadth, endurance, and long-term consequences of the kinds of negative attitudes and behaviors associated with this process in order to develop a larger and clearer picture of the entire system of college admissions. One analyst remarked that, “This web of institutional inconsistencies experienced by students in this study, induces a cynicism about colleges that may create a broader disrespect for education, as well as a cynicism about other institutions.” The results of this pilot research project will be used as a basis to secure funding for a more comprehensive study.

We have learned enough about how the activities of colleges appear to create strong pressures towards undesirable student attitudes and unethical behavior to be able to recommend certain remedial actions. Colleges can and should do all they can to understand the effects of their actions, and to implement institutional and collective practices that are educationally sound and socially responsible.

Imagine a world in which the college admission process itself would be admired, rather than ridiculed or gamed by students, parents, and the broader society—a process that exemplifies the highest ideals of education and inspires students to flourish more than it encourages students to become cynical. This vision should be a catalyst that elicits the necessary leadership among colleges to develop a better system. It is clear that students in our focus groups would respond favorably to integrity in college admissions.

A sampling of quotes from students

“College admissions has just become a confusing industry. There are way too many people making their livings stressing all of us up.”

“ I think the responsibility [for the messages we get] is with the colleges and with the parents. That you’re a perfectly good person – maybe even a better person – if you don’t go to one of the top ten colleges. Changing to that perception would be more helpful than anything.”

“ I just didn’t really know how to strike a balance between honesty and what I thought they just wanted to hear.”

“The name of a college is what you need to get in the door. People feel like they need to go to a good college to get a good job. That’s the bottom line.”

“I have never wanted anything in my life as badly as I wanted to get into that college... that is not how it should be.”

“You just learn, okay, that coach doesn’t want me.....You have things that some people want and some people don’t want.”

“I think the whole college application process makes us into cheaters because we want to misrepresent ourselves...because we want to get in.”

“Cheating in school I think is something different; that actually bothers me. But cheating on a standardized test, I feel almost like if you are smart enough to do it, go ahead.”

“There is something terribly wrong with this process...please fix it.”

“It’s part of the game. It’s pretty much a game. It’s a game.”

“There are definitely a lot of kids who are so qualified, so smart, and just don’t really have the resources to help them in the process that we have [in a private school]. It’s really unfair.”

“It’s all about marketing, they are trying to sell to us and we are trying to sell to them.”

“I just think colleges’ number one priority is themselves.”

“One thing that really turned me off about the whole admissions process was just the way colleges advertise themselves. That bothers me. It just bothers me a lot.”

“There is so much propaganda. Colleges should try less to sell themselves and more to act interested in students and in education.”

“We would not apply to so many colleges if they were honest and told us what they were all about.”

“All colleges say they are highly selective and then encourage us all to apply. They are just playing a game for themselves.”

“The SAT doesn’t test anything except strategy.”

“We just want to know what the Admission Deans want.”

“I wanted to take a Shakespeare course my Sophomore year but instead had to take a required PSAT prep course. I hated that.”

“The whole ED process is so discouraging...it makes you think of it like just solely a competition to get a spot...”

“It is a shame that your SAT score gets put before character. It’s just ridiculous the amount of importance that is placed on it.”

“There was an entire quarter when we had to practice for the PSAT, then practice for the ACT and SAT. We took three practice practice PSAT’s and three PSAT’s. It’s kind of insane.”

“I think cheating is very common.”

“My sister is twelve, she is taking the SAT.”

“College is always on my mind. It has been a horrible experience.”

“What exactly are you looking for – that would make everything more efficient...it would cut down the application pool by half.”

“It feels deceiving when they get you to apply even though you don’t have a chance.”

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