

June 4, 1987

Diversity, Competition, and Costs

A Candid Look at Selective Admissions

Robert Zemsky
with Gregory Wegner
Institute for Research on Higher Education
University of Pennsylvania

In reflecting on how our institutions might change current methods of recruiting and admitting freshmen, Fred Hargadon reminded me of Georges Bernanos' warning that the worst, the most corrupting lies are problems poorly stated. Accordingly, the first task is simply to ask, "Is there in fact a problem in the way that selective colleges recruit and admit students?" Should we decide there is, we would then want to consider, "How might we best proceed to address that problem?" Necessarily, what follows is a sampling of both perspectives and language; in that sense, the paper is a patchwork. The implicit question it raises is, "Is there a pattern to our samplings?"

Musings, Lamentations, and Pot Shots

She is small and quiet, my daughter, but once her passions are engaged she looms larger than life. On a drive home from the airport last spring, I mused that now that she had finally chosen her college, she might tell me how she had actually gone about making the decision. I realized immediately that the question was a mistake, my interest in her and in research notwithstanding. With an innocence of the epistemology of the phrase she used with such abandon, she turned to me and hissed, "Dad, you just don't understand. College choice sucks!"

In the nearly hour-long soliloquy that followed, Tobi detailed what 18 months of worry about choosing a college had done to her and her friends—how it had affected the terms of their friendship, their sense of priorities in the last year of high school, and finally, their confidence in their ability to make mature, responsible decisions. Despite each of their successes, neither Tobi nor her friends really felt they understood how or why they

made their choices, or what they were expected to learn from such a process except, perhaps, that life was a crapshoot (my term, obviously, not theirs).

The part of the process that most troubled Tobi was her application and acceptance to one of COFHE'S most selective institutions. Her guidance counselor had suggested this school as a good "stretch"—meaning she probably wouldn't be admitted, but it was worth an application, just to see if she was competitive. She went to visit this particular campus only after being admitted; in fact she had pretty well decided on another school by then. The trouble came when she told some friends she had been accepted by her "stretch" school but had decided to go elsewhere. What she uncovered was a barely disguised vein of resentment among three friends who had been denied admission to that institution. Each made the same charge: "If you weren't interested, why did you apply? Don't you understand that they only admit a limited number from our high school?" While the school in question would no doubt deny that Tobi and her classmates were in direct competition with each other, these youngsters were remarkably perceptive about how selective institutions build their classes on the principle of broad diversity. That translates into not admitting too many applicants from the same high school, regardless of their quality. Tobi understood that her friends had a point: by applying to an institution in which she had only mild interest, she effectively lowered her classmates' chances of acceptance, including those who may have had greater interest in the institution from the beginning. She simply had no answer for them nor any real explanation for why the college selection process should have proven such an ordeal.

Tobi's lamentation commingles the three basic complaints most heard about college admissions at selective institutions. The process is becoming

- overly competitive
- detached from and disruptive of the youngster's schooling, and
- unacceptably stressful in terms of social and family relations.

More than a decade ago, the psychiatrist Herbert Sacks, writing first in the New York Times and later in an expanded essay, "'Bloody Monday': The Crisis of the High School Seniors," argued:

The present system of college admissions tends to disregard educational principles and is often insensitive to what we know of adolescent development. The admissions community has failed to identify its work with the mission of education;

to master knowledge so as to enrich one's existence, to elaborate the spirit of inquiry for critical exploration of intellectual and political life, and to illumine the personal inner world. Those who do seek to uphold these lofty principles are also hampered by the secondary school student's absorption with rank, grade, and score distinctions. But the students have not arrived at this position simply by chance; they were guided there by signposts installed by the current admissions system. Normal adolescent development is tumultuous, never straight-line, with dramatic regressions and progressions. Admissions judgments are intolerant of these peaks and nadirs in the students' mental lives, which encumber academic performance. The system rewards those fortunate young people whose learning experiences occur in a relatively conflict-free sphere of ego functioning, away from the ongoing Sturm und Drang, or those whose excessive defenses against their adolescent drives permit them to repress conflict successfully.

Sacks's observation is based on an analysis primarily of 40 troubled youngsters for whom the admissions process was proving an added burden. It is, however, a perspective that finds resonance in the work of the psychologist Howard Gardner, who along with Joseph Walters and others is seeking to develop a theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner's focus is not admissions per se, but the means and measures by which people characterize one another's learning ability and, in that broad sense, intelligence. He and his colleagues seek what they call a more humane view of human intelligence, one that describes "human cognitive competence . . . in terms of a set of abilities, talents, and mental skills, which we call 'intelligences.'" Rather than testing for intelligence in terms of the ability to perform standardized mental tests, Gardner and Walters

prefer to examine performances and products that are prized by various cultures. We analyze how individuals of exceptional talents fashion these products and we look for signs of similar, if more modest, skills in the rest of the population. . . . We think that the abilities to fashion a poem, sonata, or geometric proof, to build a computer or a bridge, to organize a political campaign or direct a corporation, all require some form of intelligence—and they may not all require the same form. If there is a plurality of abilities, as the framework of Multiple Intelligences would suggest, then it becomes of critical importance to help individuals find suitable vocational and avocational niches. Such a brokering can provide for a more efficient and harmonious society and can engender a population that feels effective.

It is the role this brokering or sorting function plays in selective college admissions that makes the latter process of interest to Gardner. Indeed, he has become something of a crusader for a substantially broader approach to evaluating student potential and for making

the preparations of those evaluations an integral part of the learning process itself. What he wants, he confesses, is “to blur the lines between assessment of potential, teaching of curriculum, and evaluation of learning” to bring these processes more in line with “new findings in the cognitive and neural sciences.” He wants to abandon the SAT, not because it is culturally or politically biased, but because it “taps only two intelligences and does so in a relatively narrow way.” Instead, Gardner

favor(s) policies which provide more useful and discriminating information about colleges and which yield useful insights concerning the student himself. We know that such processes take time. Rather than compressing the whole experience into a few months in the senior year, I favor a gradual familiarization with college during the high school years. At the same time I favor the collection of indices, like projects and portfolios, which record information about the student’s personal and cognitive growth over significant periods of time.

Gardner understands that what he has in mind may prove too costly to administer, though he only somewhat wistfully suggests making faculty the principal evaluators of portfolios. Even if the resulting admissions were not significantly changed, he argues, “high school education would be—thanks to ‘trickle down’ effects. Students would be the winners, because the lessons learned from such projects remain with the individual for the rest of her life.”

Gardner’s critique focuses principally on educational goals. Most commentators, however, focus as my daughter Tobi did on the competitiveness of the process, which pits not only student against student but institution against institution. One of the more pervasive artifacts of modern American culture is the airline monthly magazine. Tucked neatly in the seat pocket, it is the product of an industry that knows its customers well—how they earn their money, how they like to spend it, and hence what they can afford. These products reflect a comfortable knowledge of demographics.

In the spring of 1986, TWA Ambassador magazine entertained passengers with an article by Charles C. Smith, a staff writer for Contact, a quarterly publication of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Timed to coincide with the arrival of the thick and thin envelopes that signal admission and rejection to a selective institution. Smith’s piece got quickly to the point:

[A] college's reputation—that intangible yet eminently marketable commodity—rests in large part on its ability to attract high-quality applicants. . . . The annual mass mailing of thick and thin envelopes is just one key step in a school's strategy for building, maintaining, and enhancing its good name.

Smith turns next to how colleges like ours measure success in our competition for the “best and brightest.” In almost calculated deadpan, Smith strips away the veneers we have so carefully applied to our own marketing efforts:

“Selective” is what elite or prestigious colleges call themselves nowadays in preference to “elite” or “prestigious”—words that smack of upper class privilege and undemocratic snobbery. The more selective a college is, the greater is the number of applicants vying for each available slot in the incoming class—and the more the school is entitled to congratulate itself on the luster of its reputation.

The admit rate, however, is not the only measure by which our kinds of institutions monitor their relative selectivity; there is the all-important:

“yield”: ed-biz jargon for the percentage of students accepted by a given school who actually decide to attend that school. Once a college has sent out each spring's batch of thick envelopes, it is the admissions officer's turn to watch the incoming mail, anxiously toting up yield figures to determine the school's desirability.

All this Smith conveys in three brisk paragraphs under a cartoon graphic of a mortar-boarded professor lecturing a class on the subject of THE GREATEST SCHOOL ON EARTH. The rest of the article is largely warmed over Dick Moll and Ted Fiske. Near the conclusion, however, Smith, or his editors, deliver the “coup de grace.” Drawing on an analysis of leading college guides (Barron's, Lovejoy's, Peterson's), the article answers the question most readers cannot help asking: THE FIFTEEN most likely to turn you down.” Twelve are COFHE institutions.

How We See Ourselves

The troubling thing about these lamentations, musings, and pot shots is that they differ so greatly from our own view of ourselves. With justifiable pride, we see our institutions and our admissions practices as having helped transform American higher

education since the Second World War. While going to college is now considered an integral part of growing up in America, it is worth remembering that this was not always the case. In the first decades of this century, less than 5 percent of Americans aged 25 and over had completed four years of college education. By 1940 the numbers had hardly changed: only 4.6 percent of those over age 25 reported having attained a college baccalaureate degree. In the years following the Second World War, this ratio has nearly quadrupled to 17 percent of Americans 25 and older. Today more than half of the nation's high school graduates proceed immediately to college.

Behind this growth is a fundamental change in the way that colleges and universities—and the public in general—have come to regard the question of access to higher education. Gone forever are the days when admission to a college or university was restricted to a privileged prosperous elite. Institutions now seek to enroll everyone; race, income, religion, age, and for the most part, gender no longer figure as reasons to exclude those who apply.

Our institutions have played a major role in bringing about this transformation in college admissions. We no longer reserve our freshman spaces for the sons and daughters of alumni and graduates of secondary schools with which we have developed comfortable relationships. We have become increasingly inclusive, national institutions, seeking students of promise wherever we find them. Our schools invented the concept of need-based aid, which for the first time made it possible for any qualified candidate to matriculate at a selective institution. COFHE colleges and universities were among the first of the selective private institutions to reach out to minority populations. We have ended the traditional bias against women, erased the discriminating effects of anti-Semitism, and demonstrated that an admissions process based on academic merit and promise still leaves room for youngsters whose abilities do not come fully across on standardized test scores and arithmetically precise grade point averages.

While Haverford College is not a member of COFHE, its veteran admissions dean, Bill Ambler, spoke for all of us when he recently cataloged the extent of changes that have occurred in the 30 years since he joined that school's admissions office. When he started, he recalled, Haverford "had a black and white view booklet with a plain gray Quaker cover. I was told that it was very expensive and that I should only give it to people who I was sure

were going to enroll.” He also remembers working under the College’s Vice President, Archibald MacIntosh, who relied on instinct as much as deliberation in building a Haverford class:

In the spring of the year, when decisions came, I’d take the files into Mac’s office and he’d look at them, and he’d say, “Well, let’s take this one. Let’s set this one aside.” Most of these decisions seemed to make sense, but some did not.

Finally, after a while, I got up enough courage to ask him, “Mac, why are we admitting this fellow?”

And the response was, “Can’t you see?”

I said, “No,” and he said, “You will,” And sure enough, later on I did,

All that has changed now. Today Bill Ambler heads a professional staff of four full-time admissions officers. He will mail a four-color brochure to anyone who asks (and many who don’t). He has made a major investment in a video production, regularly cultivates more than 900 high school counselors, and runs “an overnight visitors service which at times threatens to turn the College into a motel.” The change Bill is most proud of, however, is in the character of Haverford’s applicant pool and resulting freshmen class.

While in the 1950s there had been slightly over 500 applications for a class of 130:

there are now a little more than 2100 [for a class of 287]. . . . Not only have the numbers increased, but the composition of the pool has changed. In the late 1950s, more than a third of our applicants came from Pennsylvania; now, only about 10 percent come from Pennsylvania. Earlier, one-third of our applicants came from outside the middle Atlantic states; now, almost half of them do. In the late 1950s, we averaged about twelve minority applicants a years. This year there were 280. Of course, earlier there were no women in the applicant pool; this year there were 904 of them.

These changes have made a difference in the composition of the entering classes. We have become a national institution. The numbers of students from New England, from states west of the hundredth meridian and from abroad have quadrupled. . . . Seven percent of this year’s entering freshmen were foreign citizens.

The number of minorities in the freshman class has grown from two to forty-six, the largest number we have ever had.

To all of us, but particularly to those like Bill Ambler who have devoted their professional lives to “opening up” our institutions, the charge that somehow we have lost sight of the kids themselves in our competition for the nation’s very best students seems particularly unfair. An important antidote to that charge was the McNeil-Lehrer Newshour segment broadcast over PBS, which took the television camera inside the admissions committee deliberations at Williams College. No one who saw the original broadcast in the spring of 1986 or its rebroadcast this past spring could fail to be impressed by the extraordinary care used to review individual cases. Whatever the applicants’ perceptions, the admissions committee saw a direct and deliberate link between the application and the educational process. There was, moreover, clear evidence of the committee’s painstaking efforts to get to know the applicant—to look for reasons to admit, rather than deny admission. At least in this segment, there was little evidence of institutional competition or the pitting of one youngster directly against another.

The Paradox Considered

We are left, however, with a very real paradox. Despite our best intentions and efforts to explain what we are about, there remains a persistent and probably growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction over the way that bright and accomplished youngsters get matched up with a selective college or university. Where we see remarkable success in diversifying our applicant pools and hence our student bodies, too many commentators as well as students and parents see institutions with substantial applicant pools devoting significant resources to recruiting even more applicants. There is a barely disguised

suspicion that we recruit kids in order to turn them down, since the supply of available places in our collective freshman class is so much smaller than the number of students our institutions have encouraged to apply.

There is more than a kernel of truth in this observation. In 1985, COFHE institutions collectively reported receiving applications from 88,889 individual high school seniors for just 23, 932 spaces in the freshman classes of the reporting institutions. In short, more than three times as many students sought admission to one or more of our colleges than we had room for. For the five most selective universities among our membership, there were more than six times the number of unique applicants for available spaces. Among all successful applicants to one or more reporting COFHE institutions (35,958 in all), 67 percent (23,932) matriculated at a COFHE institution. Among the most selective universities the yield was even higher, 72 percent (7,055 out of 9,805). For comparative purposes it is helpful to note that in the 1930s at Harvard there were 1.3 applicants for each space.

One of the causes for the surplus of applications that our institutions enjoy both collectively and for the most part individually is the growing sophistication and effectiveness of our institutional marketing efforts. We all employ bigger admissions staffs comprised increasingly of talented people who consider the recruitment effort as both a career and a profession. They have learned through experimentation and adaptation to market the merits of a quality education from a selective institution. Their successes, moreover, have earned them the confidence of the institutional leaders to whom they report. As a result, both the cost and scale of admissions efforts have increased substantially at all of our institutions.

Among the 17 COFHE universities, for example, total staff size in 1985 ranged from a low of 13 to a high of 48; the average was 29.5 full-time equivalent staff. Among the 12 COFHE colleges, total staff size in 1985 ranged from a low of 12 to a high of 19; the average was 15 full-time equivalent staff.

The average admission cost per matriculating student was also substantial: \$998 for COFHE universities, \$1,381 for colleges. For the universities, the cost of matriculating the class averaged 9.7 percent of the tuition income realized from these students in their first year of enrollment. For the colleges, the relative cost of matriculating the class was equal to 13.7 percent of the tuition charged to these students during their freshman year.

These costs have also been increasing faster than inflation as measured by both the CPI and the Higher Education Price Index. While the Higher Education Price Index increased 73 percent between 1979 and 1986, admissions costs increased 118 percent at COFHE universities for the same period, and they increased 146 percent at COFHE colleges. It is also interesting to note that increases in admissions costs are not a function of a relative shortage of applicants. The most selective and attractive institutions among our membership have made the same investments in staff, travel, and marketing materials as those with less robust applicant pools.

The question that needs to be asked is simply how our institutions through the 1970s came to make such substantial investments in the marketing of undergraduate education programs. My suspicion is that the answer to this question provides an important insight into why we celebrate the success of our admissions efforts while others question what we are really about.

The answer itself probably lies in the two clusters of issues that in the early 1970s came to dominate discussions within our institutions. The first cluster of issues grew out of the social ferment of the 1960s and the realization that our institutions had a special obligation to become more open, both in their processes and, more importantly, in the kinds of people we sought to include within our student bodies. The 1960s taught us that we could not afford to be comfortable in our homogeneity. We needed to reach out to include different kinds of people, with differing backgrounds, aspirations, and economic resources. The result was a fundamental commitment to achieving substantially greater diversity within our freshman classes—we began recruiting more minorities, more urban, more blue collar as well as more rural students.

For many of our most selective institutions, in particular, the reason to expand admissions staffs, increase travel budgets, and purchase marketing materials was to enable the institution first to identify talented youngsters who could bring social, ethnic, and financial diversity to the applicant pool, and second to persuade substantial numbers of those students to enroll. The purpose of the new admissions investments was to increase the diversity of the class, whether through the use of Search, special mailings to targeted youngsters, or additional travel to high schools and college fairs. Perhaps ironically, many of us first engaged in professional marketing as part of our commitment to increase the social diversity of our institutions.

The second cluster of issues arose from financial concerns. For most of higher education, the 1970s were years of financial shock: uncontrolled expense, unforeseen deficits, constant wrangles over budget, and a sense of economic decay. Bud Cheit perceived the imminent changes in the title of his 1971 study, The New Depression in

Higher Education. Still, our institutions learned to cope. We invested heavily in financial planning and management. We reduced staff, deferred maintenance, and postponed new construction. We also came to appreciate the financial importance of tuition income. Our first instinct was to maintain price, while slowly expanding enrollment to ease the pressure of the budget. By becoming co-ed, all male colleges were able to expand enrollment, and hence tuition income. When, by the mid-1970s, most of our institutions could no longer expand enrollment without significantly increasing both physical plant and faculty capacity, we began to accelerate our tuition increases while trying to hold constant our expenses, particularly for salaries.

As the tuitions our institutions charged began to increase faster than those of our competitors, particularly in the public sector, we began focusing new attention on the robustness of our applicant pools. We began to consider whether there would in fact be enough students who could afford the tuition we needed to charge in order to maintain the quality of our educational programs. It was at this point that higher education discovered demographics and recognized that the number of eighteen-year-olds would continue to decline well into the 1990s. A decade later, it is hard to capture the sense of near panic that set in when our institutions began to contemplate the need to begin attracting a greater share of a declining applicant pool, simply to assure stable enrollments despite escalating tuition rates.

Again, we turned to our admissions offices. Not only would they be expected to increase the diversity of the applicant pool—including, paradoxically, more students of limited financial means—but also the scale of the applicant pool, including substantial numbers of applicants who would not require financial aid. Marketing offered a means to

accomplish these goals, and our institutions began increasingly to borrow from strategies that the nation's service sector had developed to market its products. By the close of the decade most of our institutions had become very adept at building applicant pools, and those that lagged behind soon learned the importance of recruiting a professional staff that understood how to use the new marketing techniques.

Consequences, Intended and Otherwise

Two missions we set for our admissions offices: to diversify the freshman class socially, culturally, and financially, while simultaneously increasing the applicant pool in order to assure a sufficient supply of tuition income. The latter goal we more than achieved. By the mid-1980s most of our institutions had increased both their selectivity and their yields, while either maintaining or slightly increasing the size of the freshman class, all the while increasing tuition rates substantially faster than the underlying rate of inflation. Our ability to increase tuition despite a general over-supply of college places has not escaped the attention of our critics. Typical is a recent headline from The Washington Monthly, "Highbrow Robbery: The Colleges Call it Tuition, We Call it Plunder." One of the most disarming observations is by Terry Hartle, formerly of the American Enterprise Institute and now a principle education analyst for Ted Kennedy:

All sorts of reasons have been put forward to justify the sharp tuition increases of the early 1980s: the cost of quality, expensive equipment, institutional aid, faculty raises, the catching up for the 1970s (the last one is starting to sound pretty stale). Regardless of whether or not these are true, it seems clear that the basic laws of supply and demand are really what is at work in the selective institutions: There are more qualified applicants than places for them. As a result, there is little need to exercise restraint. Prices go up, the number of applicants stays stable (or goes up), so prices rise further. Not much mystery in that.

What is also clear is that the initial impetus for our marketing efforts, the goal of broadening the diversity of our institutions, has not proven as easy to accomplish. Bill Bowen, in one of his last major reports as President of Princeton, reported that from the standpoint of economic diversity, his institution was actually losing ground:

Whereas there was a clear increase in the percentage of the class that came from low- and middle-income families between 1968 and 1980, that increase appears to have been erased in the most recent five years. . . [W]e are now back to approximately the same income distribution that prevailed in the late 1960s, and no one can be sure whether this most recent trend will continue.

Our institutions have reason to be proud of their outreach to minorities in general and blacks in particular. In the class our institutions matriculated last fall, there were a total of 1,665 blacks, or about 5.7 percent of our collective incoming class. We also know, however, that our collective ability to enroll black students has reached a plateau, and in the case of the COFHE universities has actually declined slightly—from 7 percent of the class in 1978 to 5.8 percent of the class in 1986. Part of the reason for this decline, as our admissions officers often point out, is that the number of qualified black students has not increased in recent years. All selective institutions are fishing from the same small pool.

This decline in black enrollment has not escaped the attention of those who believe our institutions simply have not done enough to create an active pool of qualified black youngsters. Writing last year in the New York Times Magazine, Brent Staples essentially charged us with having reneged on our commitment to the educational disadvantaged.

Staples grew up black in Chester, Pennsylvania, “an angry, dying little factory town” south of Philadelphia. The man who changed his life was Eugene Sparrow, then the only black faculty member at what is now Widener University:

Sparrow wandered into a local hangout in a not-so-wonderful neighborhood and struck up a conversation with me. On paper, I was a mediocre student from one of the lowest-ranking high schools in the state; I had not taken college boards, though it was late in the year; I hadn't seen a guidance counselor since the seventh grade; I had no plans beyond the shipyard and the Army. Sparrow decided on the basis of an hour's conversation held partly on the street corner that I was "college material" and forced a phone number on me, which I later dialed. That year 22 other young black men I later came to know had similar encounters. Among them today are a doctor, two lawyers, a college administrator and a journalist—virtually the only professionals I know from that period in my life.

Part of Staples' essay focuses on the University of Chicago, where he himself went on for graduate study. His observations about that school's admissions practice could apply to virtually any of our institutions. The fact that a university situated in one of the country's largest contiguous black populations has so few black students—and even fewer black faculty—strikes what Staples calls "an exposed nerve." He quotes William J. Wilson, chair and Lucy Flower Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology at Chicago:

"Our numbers are shameful. You can't tell me there are not brilliant students out there in the ghetto who could thrive here."

Dean of admissions Dan Hall agrees, but he flinches when I speak of "risk" students—the school abandoned its special admission policy long ago. Asked about the ghetto next door, he replies, "We are not the only school that does not recruit in the inner city. Go ask Columbia if it recruits in Harlem." The answer from James T. McMenemy, Columbia's director of admissions: "Much less than we used to. The payoff is not what it used to be." Diane McKoy, the assistant to the director, says she hits the prep schools and privates—"then we go to the publics and salvage what we can. I know of one school where 10 years ago we used to take the top 20. Now we are lucky if the top five are competitive."

Staples' response to this attitude contains a mixture of anger, puzzlement, and disillusionment. The tenor of his remarks is as telling as their content:

When I consider the declining number of black students and that universities are recruiting fewer and fewer blacks from the nation's inner cities, I feel

myself being erased, much the way one wipes a chalk figure from a blackboard. Like many of my black inner-city contemporaries who entered college in the big minority recruiting push of the late 1960s, I am partly the creation of a college recruiter.

What is clearer today than it was a decade ago is that the marketing techniques we have developed to recruit our students are primarily successful among the middle and upper middle class—a fact that is not surprising since most of those techniques were first developed by service industries for selling reasonably expensive products to the same segment of the population. The people who respond most often to our techniques are high achievers from families that value education and that, for the most part, can afford its costs. While upwards of 40 percent of our undergraduates qualify for need-based aid, nearly 60 percent of our students come from families that can afford more than \$16,500 per year per child in educational costs. There is little social or cultural diversity among American families capable of meeting such costs. It is also clear that high tuitions and fees create much of the need that justifies student aid. More than half of the aided students at our institutions come from families that can pay substantial sums for the education of their children. The median parental contribution for aided students attending a COFHE institution in 1986 was \$5,207.

It may be that the success of our marketing has actually helped reinforce the stratification of higher education along largely socio-economic lines. In The Structure of College Choice, Penney Oedel and I reported on the highly predictable nature of college choice patterns as revealed by the institutions to which students sent their SAT scores. Students from families with at least \$35,000 annual income in which both parents had a college degree were nearly twice as likely to seek out nationally and regionally oriented

institutions—our segment of the market—than were students whose parents earned less than \$35,000 per year or did not have a college education:

We suspect that some people will be distressed by our findings. In the America of the 1980s, they may want to argue, college choice should no longer be a function of family income, parental education, and scholastic aptitude as measured by the SAT; rather the students' personal ambitions and preferences should determine the kinds of institutions they consider in making this life-defining decision. . . . Our own experiences, our conversations with admissions officers, and the data we have derived from the Market Segment Model, however, all point to a single conclusion: the patterns of college choice are stitched deeply into the social and economic fabric of the nation.

Larry Litten makes much the same point in suggesting that our marketing efforts may have reached the point of saturation. Based on his analysis of why students in four critical markets (Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver, and Seattle) apply to elite institutions, he observed:

To the extent that our data accurately represent market shares among the types of students who currently gravitate toward our institutions, it appears that there isn't a great deal of room for improvement. A majority of the highest ability students and the Jewish students in our data already send at least one half of their applications to Elite schools, and the children of fathers with advanced degrees are not far behind.

At the same time, Litten's interviews and questionnaires are turning up a deep-seated suspicion of our kinds of institutions among a substantial portion of the population. These youngsters and, just as importantly, their parents, find that our institutions cost too much in terms of risk to self-esteem and the psychological price they would have to pay in order to become a part of our world. In reporting the results of focus group interviews in which participants were asked why every kid with high ability doesn't apply to a selective institution if they are the best, Litten observes: "The first answer in the Atlanta group was 'they are expensive,' but the litany that followed focused exclusively on non-financial costs; in Cleveland the discussion turned immediately to the non-financial costs and stayed in this domain." The list of these non-financial costs is revealing:

Amount of studying required

Adjustments to a new culture

Social pressures

Worry about personal safety

Competition on campus
for personal recognition

Loss of contact with home

Possibility of admission denial

One part of the problem may be that the style of marketing is itself competitive, reinforcing an image of specialness as well as scarcity. A key element of most marketing strategies is to explain just how important choosing the right college is. One of the most admired view books produced by a COFHE institution puts the matter clearly: “The admissions process . . . begins with the assumption that few decisions in life are as important as choosing the right college.” Another of our institutions tells successful applicants just how special they are by reporting in its letter of admission, a copy of which is incidentally sent to the parents: “Selected from nearly 3,200 applicants (the most in the College’s . . . history), next fall’s freshman class of 365 students promises to be academically strong with a variety of talents.”

We have also helped spawn at least two industries, which reinforce this emphasis on competition. The first is the college guide industry, which purports to provide both a real picture of life on each of our campuses as well as a host of statistics by which students and parents can know the score—that is, know which institutions are truly selective. The second industry helps students achieve the proper profile for admissions, either by coaching them on how to improve their performance on standardization tests, or preparing a more attractive application, or both. We find both industries counterproductive and yet remain powerless to limit their appeals to our prospective students.

This emphasis on competition, according to Stanford’s Bill Massy, may also be the by-product of our previous experiences with financial stringency and our recognition that what he calls the “Golden Age of Higher Education” of the 1950s and 1960s will not be repeated:

Increased competition both within and among institutions is the inevitable result of the recognition that program decisions will be forever driven by stringent financial tradeoffs. Individual faculty, deans and program directors, and whole institutions will strive with greater energy to protect or enhance their funding bases, at the

expense of others if necessary, as it becomes more apparent that aggregate resources will continue to be insufficient to meet all important program goals.

To remain whole in the face of financial stringency is to preserve one's ability to augment resources, either by increasing process or expanding enrollment. In an era of competition, the rich get richer.

Finally, we need to recognize that society itself is again becoming more competitive. In this sense, our marketing is both a reflection of and contributor to larger influences that are telling Americans what to buy, how to organize their careers, and how to preserve this nation's economy in the face of other nations' increased competitiveness. One former dean of admission with whom I shared an early draft of this paper remarked, "What do you expect in a world in which Mercedes and BMW spend vast sums on advertising in order to assure their product will be in constant short supply?"

Time for Further Reflection

My argument is simply that in the 1970s and 1980s we became substantially better at competing with one another—sometimes at considerable cost to the students we sought to enroll—without achieving the diversity, which was the goal of these efforts. The kinds of remedial measures we might be willing to consider will clearly depend on how each of us views the educational and institutional consequences of the current competition among us for the nation's best high school graduates. In this paper I have tried to sketch some of the concerns that have been raised, both by our critics and by ourselves. Is it now time to begin a frank, if quiet, discussion of these concerns? Can we begin quietly, yet purposefully, speculating among ourselves as to the alternate ways of achieving the twin goals of social and cultural diversity and financial stability? In the balance of this paper I suggest three basic strategies, each in response to a different reading of the current situation.

1. The process is sound, but it is too often misunderstood by students, parents, and secondary school personnel. As we approach our present and prospective critics, we must be careful not to confuse means and ends. What we have achieved over the last 40 years is a substantial broadening of the social and cultural bases of our institutions. We have

reached out, and we have spent considerable amounts of our own funds to provide high quality education to youngsters from families who lack the means to pay for college. If we have remained selective—elitist if you will—it is in pursuit of standards of excellence that deserve constant reaffirmation.

While we should not be surprised by attacks on our admissions practices—they are inevitable whenever a scarce good is being rationed—we should and can be more sensitive to the way we present ourselves to our potential constituencies. Three changes in particular should be considered:

- De-emphasize the life-determining importance of being accepted at one particular college or university. Collectively develop literature that speaks candidly about the similarities between selective institutions, noting the fact that students frequently graduate from institutions other than the one at which they spend their freshman year.
- Work to establish a socially acceptable alternative to college attendance for people aged 18-22. Encourage more students to postpone their entry into college, in part by purposely seeking applicants who after high school have done interesting things outside of a formal academic context.
- Communicate better that acceptance or rejection by a particular school is often the result of a subjective judgment in balancing competing institutional needs. Stress that even while admissions officers make their decisions in good faith, those decisions necessarily derive from a cursory knowledge of most applicants.

2. For too many students and their families, the college admissions process both creates unnecessary anxiety and distorts educational purposes. We must take seriously the critiques of analysts like Sacks and Gardner, as well as the concerns of secondary school teachers and counselors who say that in our competition for applicants we have lost sight of the kids themselves. Choosing, but more importantly, preparing for a college should be a learning experience that helps youngsters find out about themselves—their talents and limitations, the kinds of experiences from which they have learned the most and least, the rewards and risks of becoming a member of one of our learning communities.

Discussions of the application, as opposed to the submissions process, generally focus on two broad issues:

- the value of standard measures of academic preparedness (SAT, GPA, class rank);
- the need to simplify the admissions application in general and the value of the common application form in particular.

We need to go beyond these concerns, learning better to make the application process cohere with the applicant's educational program. At the same time, we must work to remove the implication that college admissions is designed principally to tell applicants which schools do not want them. As a beginning we might consider the following steps:

- Minimize the amount of material specifically required for college admissions, including the application essay. Whether or not we adopt Gardner's idea of using portfolios, we need to develop procedures that allow colleges to consider work actually produced in school, rather than materials produced in response to specific application requirements. If school materials do not tell admissions committees as much or more than essays written as part of the application process, then we need to be more specific about the kinds of school work that in fact best prepares kids for our kinds of colleges. A publication laying out what parents and children should do to prepare for college could be useful in this capacity.
- Use the SATs and Achievement Test scores to establish minimums rather than to compare youngsters directly with each other. A college might decide that an SAT Verbal of 600 is essential for admission, but not that an applicant who scores 700 is more admissible than one who scores 650. Similar statements might be made about GPAs and class rank if the lack of a national norm could be overcome.
- Develop cooperative programs for acquainting secondary students with the actual experience of college. One possibility would be for high school juniors to spend a week or more living at a representative college, making clear that the visit is not part of the admissions process but rather to teach the student about college in general. Implementing such programs could encourage students to develop evaluative criteria other than those used by the college guide industry to measure institutional standing.
- Develop more cooperative marketing and recruiting programs to counter the impression that acceptance to a particular institution is a mark of greater distinction than acceptance at another of the same caliber.

Ted Bracken makes an important point when he observes that the college admissions process plays a wide variety of institutional roles. Besides matching students and colleges, the admissions process is expected to help create future donors, publicize the institution, bolster relations with alumni, send curricular messages to secondary schools, and—increasingly—help families organize their finances to meet the high cost of college tuitions. Intuitively, we understand how these different functions might send mixed signals to students and their parents. Perhaps it is time to gain a more systematic understanding of the various participants and interest groups in the admissions process and the way that communications and signals are sent.

3. Competition among institutions for high-ability students has created an admissions process that has become unacceptably expensive both in terms of financial resources and institutional self-esteem. Though understandable, our attraction to marketing techniques has taken on a life of its own. The youngsters we seek to educate have been reduced to markers for keeping score in an ever-intensifying game to establish our competitiveness and hence selectivity. Only a fundamental change in the system of college admissions is likely to curb the excesses that have begun to flow from successful marketing.

- One possibility is for selective colleges and universities to start behaving as part of a system rather than a market. The goal would be to lessen bilateral competition in which the student applies individually to each college of interest, and instead applies to a set of colleges, which he or she might rank in terms of willingness to attend. The colleges in turn would rank applicants in terms of fit with the college's program. A computer program would then match students and institutions so that the student received a single letter of admission (and no rejections) from the institution that he ranked the highest and also ranked him sufficiently high to be included in their most desirable set. This procedure is now used to admit medical school graduates to hospital residencies and internships and women to Panhellenic sororities.

- A variation would be for students to apply simultaneously to several sets of institutions—for example the Ivies, COFHE co-ed colleges, and, if appropriate, COFHE women’s colleges. That student would then be admitted to the three institutions, one from each set, with which he or she had the best matching within the set. The student would then choose among these three institutions and any non-COFHE institution offering admission.
- Institutions might choose to admit only part of their class using this system. Youngsters would have a choice of applying to individual institutions, as they do now, or through this new process to a set of institutions.

Twice before in this century our institutions have banded together to rethink how we admit and aid students. Both occasions brought about fundamental changes in higher education. In the early 1900s Charles Eliot of Harvard and Nicholas Butler Murray of Columbia and their Committee of Ten established the importance of standardized entrance examinations and created the College Board. Half a century later, our institutions played the major role in developing need-based financial aid and establishing the College Scholarship Service. In each case, the resulting innovation was seen by our institutions as a means of regulating competition by establishing standard methodologies and processes for evaluating students. Has the time come for us to consider further means of regulating our competition?