A Question For... LLOYD THACKER

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Is the College Admissions Process Too Obsessed With Rankings, Test Scores, and Prestige?

Yes. The undue influence of these and other market-driven proxies for quality education threatens the public-interest role of higher education, the stability and integrity of many colleges, and the way education is perceived and pursued among students, high schools, and families. It is creating excessive stress, cynicism, gamesmanship, and confusion. The more colleges rely on rankings, test scores, and prestige, the more questionable the admissions system.

How did this come about?

Many factors have converged to transform college admissions into a problematic commercial exercise. These factors include demographic shifts; declines in public funding; the general expansion of the market metaphor in American culture; presidents and boards confusing what is good for business with what is good for education; increased media and government interest in college admissions; and the shifting role of the college president from educational visionary to CEO. Billion-dollar subsidiary industries of student agents, enrollment consultants, marketing firms, the test-prep industry, and the "ranksters" have thrived.

Colleges and universities learned how to sell education as a product and discovered an all-too-willing clientele.

How can institutions balance the need to respond to consumer and competitive pressures with their obligation to champion societal benefits of higher education?

Colleges can successfully deliver genuine value by demonstrating educational integrity. Put the educational needs of students at center stage. Strive to align admissions practices with educational purposes. Finally, develop admissions practices that reflect those precious educational resources uniquely *entrusted* to higher education—imagination, critical thinking, citizenship, integrity, leadership, creativity, cooperation, passion, and courage of convictions.

As institutions held in public trust, colleges can best serve their own interests by doing what's right for students. Benefits will come by demonstrating fiduciary responsibility to educational mission.

If you could wave a magic wand and say, "This practice will be abolished forevermore," what would that practice be?

The current version of financial-aid leveraging that claims to be merit-based. In most cases, it is wasteful and counter to educational principles: It subsidizes those who would otherwise bring more resources to the enterprise while diverting money that could be used to boost access and diversity. Cooperating with the "ranksters" is an inextricably entwined practice.

Should colleges be relying more, or less, on standardized testing?

Less. Most educators, including test makers, would agree that tests should serve and be governed by educational concerns, such as whether tests are being employed according to their intended purpose, whether tests are measuring what we value, and what the public perceptions and impacts are regarding how colleges use standardized testing. A growing number of institutions are deemphasizing standardized tests and subsequently are being rewarded with improvements in enrollment, revenue, and overall educational quality.

How can boards affect admissions policy and practice to ease the pressure?

First, consider the costs of not participating in reform. Then, encourage your president to orchestrate a campaign that will position your campus as a leader in admissions reform to better align practices with mission.

This will require renewing institutional commitment to core educational values, developing more meaningful measures of educational quality and success, championing the larger societal benefits of education, reforming current types of competitive behavior, exerting educational authority in shaping public perception and policies regarding higher education, developing mission-driven admission practices, and refusing to cooperate with organizations whose values run counter to this.

Ultimately, presidents acting with support of their trustees have the power, obligation, and opportunity to use the admissions arena for exercising educational leadership.