

The Inaugural Conference of the USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice

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At Enrollment Conference, Experts Ponder a Higher Education ‘Puzzle’

By Eric Hoover

LOS ANGELES –Why are Americans who attend college more likely to vote than those who do not? And why are people who earn degrees less likely to smoke cigarettes?

Michael S. McPherson isn't sure, but on Monday evening he told an audience of admissions officials here that such questions were worth investigating. After all, the answers might help explain how, exactly, attending college changes people.

“What makes these outcomes happen is a great, interesting puzzle,” said Mr. McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation and a former president of Macalester College, in St. Paul, Minn.

Mr. McPherson's remarks came during an opening speech at the

inaugural conference of the University of Southern California's new Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice. The center was created to improve the admissions profession's understanding of admissions, financial aid, and student outcomes.

Today, attendees plan to discuss a host of issues, including college readiness, the implications of demographic changes, and the impact of tuition and financial aid on college choice.

As they ponder such topics, Mr. McPherson said, they should also consider big-picture questions that transcend admissions outcomes. One: What are the experiences of students once they enroll?

“We study how to get in, how to pay for it, and what happens after college,” Mr. McPherson said. “But there's less on what happens to students while they're there.”

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Admissions Experts Call for Broader Definition of College Readiness

By Eric Hoover

LOS ANGELES – What do SAT scores reveal about a student’s ability to succeed in college? Not nearly enough, admissions experts here agreed on Tuesday.

At the inaugural conference of the University of Southern California’s new Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice, admissions deans and higher-education researchers said colleges and universities must look beyond standardized tests and embrace a broader understanding of college readiness to promote access amid sweeping demographic changes.

During a lively discussion, Arlene Wesley Cash, vice president for enrollment management at Spelman College, asked her colleagues to consider how definitions of readiness may vary among different kinds of applicants: a student who has spent 20 years in the work force, a “genius in rural Arkansas” who took honors classes via satellite, and a student of privilege who has been home schooled.

“College readiness is something like good art,” Ms. Cash said. “It is hard to define, and everyone will have a different take on it, depending on their perspective. However, I think we can agree that we can agree ... that we know it when we see it.”

Systematically evaluating students’ nonacademic abilities is often tricky, however. Wayne J. Camara, vice president for research and analysis at the College Board, said more colleges must consider developing reliable measures of noncognitive traits, such as leadership, that correlate with success in college.

Recent research suggests that tools used to evaluate job applicants in the private sector may be useful in admissions. For instance,

Mr. Camara said, a “situational judgment inventory”—which presents a typical college scenario and asks respondents what they would and would not do—and a series of multiple-choice biographical questions could help colleges predict first-year grade-point averages as well as nonacademic performances.

“Rather than institutions’ continuing to do this subjectively, with good judgment, we need objective measurements,” Mr. Camara said.

Michael W. Kirst, an emeritus professor of education and business administration at Stanford University, shared Mr. Camara’s view that college readiness is multifaceted—and more complex than first-year grades. Yet a narrow definition of college readiness as measured by standardized-test scores persists, he said, because of a “detachment” between curricula at high schools and colleges.

For instance, while colleges may value technical reading skills, many high schools may not emphasize the mechanical skills that would prepare students to interpret information used in college courses. “More Beowulf and English literature is not going to get you there,” Mr. Kirst said.

On Tuesday, several attendees described the limitations of the SAT. None did so more forcefully than Saul Geiser, a researcher at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California at Berkeley. Mr. Geiser said that achievement tests are more equitable measures of college readiness than the SAT because they more closely align with—and reinforce—what students learn in high school.

De-emphasizing the SAT, Mr. Geiser said, “could reintroduce a level of rationality to the overheated world of college admissions.”

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August 7, 2008

Enrollment Expert Gives Top 5 Reasons Why Student-Retention Strategies Fail

By Eric Hoover

LOS ANGELES – Retention is the issue that has led to the creation of a thousand campus task forces. Despite the time and money many colleges spend to improve their graduation rates, however, administrators often describe those rates as an intractable problem. Why?

David H. Kalsbeek offered some answers on Wednesday at the first-ever conference of the University of Southern California's Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice. Mr. Kalsbeek, senior vice president for enrollment management and marketing at DePaul University, proposed five reasons why colleges retention strategies may fail.

Obfuscation of outcomes. Mr. Kalsbeek said that administrators often steer discussions of retention away from graduation rates and toward more noble-sounding results, like improving "educational attainment." The problem, he said, is that colleges officials then tend to divert their focus from a clear, quantifiable measure of success.

Socialism of strategy. On many campuses, officials use "retention is everyone's responsibility" as a catch phrase. But unless someone, or some office, has responsibility for retention strategies,

those approaches are not likely to succeed, Mr. Kalsbeek said. "Admissions, too, is a campuswide effort," he said, "but there's still one office in charge, one person's job on the line."

Obsession with outliers. Colleges tend to devote too much time and resources to students who are the most at risk of failing, Mr. Kalsbeek said. He urged administrators to focus not on "outliers," but on reaching students in "the center of the curve."

Perseveration on persistence. Student success is often measured in terms of "persistence"—the percentage of a cohort of students who continue from one academic year to the next. Yet that measure may mask problems particular students are having. "Persistence without progress may be the worst possible outcome," Mr. Kalsbeek said.

Assuming attributes are achievements. One might guess that a college with a high graduation rate has a sound retention program, while a college with a lower graduation rate has a less effective one. The truth may not be so simple, said Mr. Kalsbeek, who described graduation rates as "institutional attributes" that indicate the demographic profile of a particular college's students. "Graduation rates are largely a function of what an institution is, not what it does," he said.



August 13, 2008

Scores Drop Slightly on ACT

By Eddy Ramírez

The slight decline in this year's average ACT scores wasn't much of a surprise to the creators of the college admissions test. That's because a record 1.42 million students—or 43 percent of all 2008 graduates—took the test, a 9 percentage point increase from last year. The pool of test takers included students from three states—Colorado, Illinois, and Michigan—that make the ACT mandatory for all graduating students, including those who are not collegebound. Out of a possible 36, the average score on this year's ACT test was 21.1, down slightly from 21.2 last year. Separately, 22 percent of test takers met the testing agency's college readiness benchmarks in English, reading, science, and math—the four subject areas covered in the test. That's down from 23 percent in 2007, but 1 percentage point higher from the previous three years. "While we saw a drop in scores this year, we're happy to say that college readiness levels remain [relatively] the same," Cyndie Schmeiser, president of the ACT education division, said this week in announcing the results.

For the testing agency, the bigger concern was the notable percentage of high school students who said they had taken college-prep classes but who still fell short of meeting college readiness benchmarks. For example, among the students who reported taking Algebra I and II as well as geometry, only 14 percent met the targets indicating they were ready for college. "We have a lot of work to do," Schmeiser said, adding that these students may have taken high school college-prep classes that are not rigorous enough.

The results of the ACT come a week after a panel of admissions experts who convened at the University of Southern California renewed calls for moving beyond standardized testing. They said colleges and universities should adopt a more comprehensive system of admitting students that includes better predictors of college success. Officials with the ACT didn't address these concerns during a telephone conference with reporters. But they made a point of emphasizing that unlike the SAT, which is more focused on aptitude skills, the ACT is tied to the material that students were taught in school. Scores for the SAT are expected to be released later this year.



August 5, 2008

Live, from USC: How Did College Change You?

Mary Beth Marklein – Education Blog

I'm hoping to hear from readers this week. Before you respond, let me explain a bit. I'm at a conference at the University of Southern California, where the kick-off speaker Monday night raised the question: What actually happens to students while they are in college?

In posing the question, economist and author Michael McPherson said he's not talking about what students take from the classroom. You can get that, he said, from Father Guido Sarducci's Five Minute University. Rather, he said, lots of evidence suggests that going to college changes people's lives. (For example – and let's

stipulate that the research is solid – studies strongly suggest that people who go to college are both more likely to vote and less likely to smoke.) “We don't know much about how these changes come about,” McPherson said, yet there's “no clear indication” that colleges are doing it intentionally.

Now comes my question (and, I hope, the fun part for you): How did college change you?

One final note: The conference I'm at is sponsored by USC's Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice, and the focus for the next two days will be on questions about who goes to college, who gets into which colleges and how they pay for it.

Los Angeles Times

August 8, 2008

College Board to debut an 8th-grade PSAT exam

The test, expected to be released in 2010, aims to identify talented students and get them into college-prep classes early. But many critics say students already face too many tests and too much stress.

By Gale Holland
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

High school students already face a battery of standardized tests on their way to college. Now, the college testing frenzy is reaching into middle school.

The College Board, which owns the SAT, PSAT and other tests, plans to introduce an eighth-grade college assessment exam in 2010, a top College Board official said this week.

The new test would be voluntary, said Wayne Camara, the vice president for research and analysis at the New York-based nonprofit, who spoke at a college enrollment conference at USC early this week. But critics noted that the PSAT, which also is voluntary, was taken last year by 3.4 million students, and said the new test would just boost the pressures for students considering college.

High school students now can take the PSAT in 10th or 11th grade to practice for the SAT college entrance exam and to qualify for educational aid programs including the National Merit Scholarship. But younger students have been signing up for the PSAT in growing numbers, perhaps to establish eligibility for gifted or enrichment programs, or to measure college readiness.

The new test would be tailored to eighth-graders. And it would put students on notice to start lining up the rigorous courses required by selective colleges, Camara said.

"By the time they're taking the PSAT, it's much too late to determine whether they should be taking algebra in the eighth grade, biology, and other important gatekeeper classes needed for college," he said. "This test will help schools identify students who have some talent and could likely succeed if they take honors or AP courses, but have not been recognized."

Some Southern California educators said they welcome the opportunity to get students, particularly African Americans and

Latinos who are underrepresented in higher education, into the college game early.

Los Angeles Unified School District Senior Deputy Supt. Ramon C. Cortines said he has proposed that the district offer all eighth-graders the chance to take the PSAT beginning next year, as many top private schools do. "Polytechnic, Westridge, Harvard-Westlake all do," Cortines said. "Just because you go to a public school you should still have the same opportunities."

Honey Koletty, a college counselor at Carson High School, agreed: "If you want your kid to go to a highly selective institution, you really do have to know in the eighth grade."

But critics questioned whether the College Board, whose SAT test is coming under increasing scrutiny from universities, is pushing the admissions frenzy into middle school simply to boost its revenue. The exam will compete with testing rival ACT's Explore, an eighth-grade assessment test used in Long Beach Unified School District and schools across Southern California, an ACT spokesman said.

Nearly 1 million students took the Explore test in the 2005-06 school year, the spokesman said.

"It's a brilliant marketing ploy, but it's pure Pabulum," Paul Kanarek, head of the Princeton Review test prep service in Southern California, said of the College Board's pitch for the eighth-grade exam. "They're locked in a death match with ACT over who takes the ACT or the SAT. Once you buy into a certain product line, you're likely to stick with it."

Camara said the exam, which has not been named, is now undergoing field development tests. It will be multiple-choice and will cover critical reading, math and writing. A spokeswoman for the College Board said it was too early to provide other details about its content.

Colleges would not use the exam's results, Camara said. "The

test is given in the eighth grade,” he said. “By the time they apply to school, [the results] would not be relevant.”

Russlyn Ali, executive director of Education Trust-West, the Oakland arm of a Washington-based nonprofit dedicated to improving education, said many California public school students are first-generation college aspirants who lack the background and information to map out their own routes to higher education.

“That plays out in kids’ real lives; most of them are taking a hodgepodge of classes . . . and by the end of 11th grade it’s too late,” Ali said.

Princeton Review’s Kanarek, however, said eighth grade is too late to begin pulling together a college prep portfolio.

“Eighth grade is not the key year for college assessment. That’s sixth grade,” he said.

“Now we’re going to have a preadmission test to get ready for the preadmission test? Get ready to get ready to get ready?” said Robert Schaeffer, public education director of Cambridge, Mass.-based FairTest, which is critical of standardized testing. “To believe you need an eighth-grade test on top of the PSAT and SAT is just insane.”

Cortines said he welcomes the new test, as it will focus families and teachers on what students need to succeed. The deputy superintendent said he has asked the board to budget \$125,000 for eighth-grade PSAT tests in the coming school year.

At the same time, Cortines said he believes Los Angeles Unified students are overtested. For example, many California high

school students now take the state standards tests, the state exit exam, the SAT and SAT subject tests, the ACT and several Advanced Placement tests, all in the junior year.

“We have people in Sacramento and in political offices that think that accountability is testing. And accountability is not testing,” Cortines said. “The eighth-grade California standards test . . . should tell us how children are prepared for high school. I’m not sure we need it again in the ninth grade . . . in the 10th grade, and then the 11th grade. Teachers are so loaded down with tests they have very little time to teach anymore.”

Deborah Sigman, deputy superintendent of assessment and accountability for the state Department of Education, defended the state-mandated tests.

“Our primary purpose is to check on how effectively are schools preparing students, and we see them as very important,” she said.

Several educators said they would wait to see the College Board’s new test before judging whether it will be useful.

“California has a very shabby test setup. A lot of these testing outfits are entrepreneurial, they’re trying to make a buck,” said W. James Popham, a professor emeritus of education at UCLA who has written extensively about testing. “If there is a market to be served, to add another test, they’re more than willing to do that. But if the test is well-conceived, it will have an instructional yield.

“But testing takes time, testing costs money. You really have to demonstrate that the addition of another test is worth it. The jury is still out on that.”

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Clearing a Path to a Better Life

USC's Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice holds its inaugural conference on improving student access to higher education.

By Anna Cearley <cearley@usc.edu>

UNIVERSITY SPECIALISTS from around the country convened at USC to discuss issues related to "Defining Enrollment in the 21st Century: Understanding Our Students and Our Communities."

The event was the inaugural conference of USC's Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice. The more than 100 attendees included admissions and enrollment officers, financial aid representatives and registrars.

"We can be wiser and more equitable in providing access," said Jerry Lucido, vice provost for Enrollment Policy and Management, and executive director for the center. "As colleges and universities, we really need to understand the students that are coming to us."

The two-day conference started off with panelists acknowledging a demographic change – fewer white students and more students of color – that is forcing universities and colleges to rethink their admissions strategies. In some cases, as in the University of California system's race-blind admissions policy, metrics and policies influence how this can be done.

The UC system's minority student population of primarily African-American and Latino students dipped from 21 percent to 15 percent between 1995 and 1998, according to statistics shown by Saul Geiser, a research associate at UC Berkeley's Center for Studies in Higher Education.

Though the number went up to 22 percent in 2007, some educators believe the rebound is deceiving because the minority population has increased over the past decade.

Harry Pachon of the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, an independent policy research organization at USC, said the Latino population is on the rise nationwide and two-thirds of first graders in three major Texas school districts are Latinos.

However, a survey by the institute found many Latino parents are unaware of college preparation and higher education options for their children. As an example of this gap, Pachon noted the word

"grant" doesn't have a precise Spanish equivalent. He suggested more bilingual outreach in traditional and online media to make information more accessible.

Other panelists talked about ways that universities can create more connections with schools as a way of better reflecting local demographics.

Bruce Walker, vice provost and director of admissions at the University of Texas, Austin, spoke about a program at his university to identify 70 schools in Texas that were not sending students to the university. As a result, scholarship programs within the individual schools were created, and the university helped students find other financial aid sources.

"We can't wait for schools to get better or you would just throw away a generation of school kids," he said. "You have to lift them up from where they are."

Gary Rhoades, director of the University of Arizona's Center for the Study of Higher Education, said universities tend to recruit the students who have higher grades and test scores that bring a prestige factor. He suggested rethinking those policies to consider a different kind of public service measurement: "a path to a better life."

Geiser of UC Berkeley said that high school grades are a more accurate measure of college readiness than standardized tests such as the SAT. He suggested that universities place a greater emphasis on high school grades and subject achievement tests.

Other panelists talked about the possibility of creating new metrics to quantify student readiness through categories such as leadership, interpersonal skills and social responsibility. Weighing these qualities along with other markers, such as test scores, could open up opportunities to a wider range of students.

"The only way to get a new level of metrics is through objective measures that can be defined," said Wayne Camara, vice president of research and analysis at the College Board.

89.3 KPCC

Southern California Public Radio

August 8, 2008

College Administrators Tackle Student Enrollment Problems

This week in Los Angeles, college and university administrators from around the country tackled a vexing issue in higher education: how to open the doors to more students and keep them enrolled. KPCC's Adolfo Guzman-Lopez has the story.

Adolfo Guzman-Lopez: Public and private universities and colleges are struggling to keep up with the United States' demographic changes. USC is no exception, vice provost Jerry Lucido told the conference. This year, he said, USC's admitted more impoverished students who qualify for financial aid, such as Pell grants. That's not the only surprise.

Jerry Lucido: I will tell you that our freshman class will in fact be less than 50 percent white this year; that's usually shocking to folks who have known our institution. You know, seventeen percent of our undergraduate population is Pell eligible; that's usually shocking to students, to folks who know about our institution.

Guzman-Lopez: Does that mean detractors can't call USC the "University of Spoiled Children" anymore? Well, that's left to be seen, considering its \$35,000 annual price tag for undergrads.

Lucido and other speakers said college admissions staffs should continue to assess test scores and grades, and should take into account other factors, like family income, to determine which obstacles applicants face as they reach toward higher education.

Conference participants such as Everett Jackson, an admissions director at the University of Nevada-Reno, were eager to hear how recruiters are connecting with high schools to attract a broad variety of students.

Everett Jackson: One of our issues is, basically, in the state of Nevada, is that we're trying to create a stronger college-going culture in the state itself. Nevada ranks as one of the most poorly educated states in the country. But, very interesting: we have a higher per-capita income that's higher than the national average.

Guzman-Lopez: Cal State University is working on that. It's sending top administrators to black and Latino neighborhoods for face time with parents, including conversations about what's required to go to college. Participants also talked about what students need to stay there and graduate. Their schools' retention rates ranged from the teens to above 90 percent.

Even colleges and universities that retain most of their students, said Williams College President Morton Schapiro, need to do a better job of measuring what they're learning, and what keeps them in school. To emphasize the point, Schapiro told a joke about a former Harvard University president who...

Morton Schapiro: ... in 1899 was asked, "How did Harvard become such a great storehouse of knowledge?" and his answer was, "Because the freshmen bring so much and the seniors take so little. You know, it builds up." I mean, that's a joke, but I don't know, is it still funny that after 110 years, we're still telling that joke, and not doing anything about outcomes assessment? I don't think it's that funny.

Guzman-Lopez: The three-day conference was the first sponsored by USC's Center for Enrollment Research Policy and Practice, a new think tank that plans to conduct more research on higher education access ... and success.