Taking on Merit in Admissions: Defining and Defending Professional Judgment

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Defining Merit: The Nexus of Mission, Excellence, and Diversity
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(Objective) College Football Rankings.

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Opening Thoughts and Reflections

- "Merit" defined...
  - To what end? Admissions? Aid?
  - TERMINOLOGY!
  - Contextual—my institution.
  - The Fit (and the Brand)
  - Multiple factors implicated
  - A question of judgment

- Diversity understood...
  - Often linked with "access"
    - RETHINK!
  - Quality
  - Key element of institutional excellence
Session Overview

- **Objectives**
  - To offer an operational framework associated with issues of merit and diversity associated with higher education admission policy and practice
  - To provide a forum for self-reflection and engagement with colleagues regarding [a] the (substantive) policies and [b] processes and communications strategies associated with institutional judgments about who to admit

- **Outcomes**
  - Clarity regarding key issues, opportunities and challenges
  - Better understanding of strategies and issues to consider
"Six for Success": Key Elements Integral to Defining and Affirming Institutional Judgments

1. Clear Goals and Strategies
2. Evidence
3. Coherence and Alignment
4. Transparency
5. Engagement
6. Advocacy
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Six for Success…Return to the Pyramid

Goal . . . . .

Educational Benefits of Diversity

Critical Mass/Structural or Compositional Diversity

Improved teaching & learning/skills development

Supporting Evidence

Supporting Evidence

Objectives. . .

Enrollment

Retention

Academic & Student Affairs

Strategies. . .
Six for Success...Return to the Pyramid

1. Clear Goals

Objectives.

1. Strategies.

Educational Benefits of Diversity

Critical Mass/Structural or Compositional Diversity

Improved teaching & learning/skills development

Enrollment

Academic & Student Affairs

Retention

2. Evidence

Enrollment

Retention

Academic & Student Affairs

Critical Mass/Structural or Compositional Diversity

Improved teaching & learning/skills development

Educational Benefits of Diversity

Clear Goals

Evidence

Strategies
Six for Success...Return to the Pyramid

1. Clear Goals . . . . . .

Objectives. . .

1. Strategies. . .

2. Evidence

Educational Benefits of Diversity and Excellence

Critical Mass/Structural or Compositional Diversity  Improved teaching & learning/skills development

Enrollment  Academic & Student Affairs

Retention

3. Coherence and Alignment
Six for Success...Return to the Pyramid

1. Clear Goals

Objectives...

Strategies...

2. Evidence

Educational Benefits of Diversity and Excellence

Critical Mass/Structural or Compositional Diversity

Improved teaching & learning/skills development

Enrollment

Academic & Student Affairs

Retention

3. Coherence and Alignment

4. Transparency

5. Engagement

6. Advocacy
1. Clear Goals and Strategies

Benchmark: Does my institution clearly define its particular mission associated with educational excellence; and is the connection of that mission to diversity clear?

- What is "educational excellence" for my institution's graduates?
  - Career and civic readiness in a 21st Century world? With what kind of focus?
  - What knowledge, skills, dispositions, experiences?

- How do I articulate the alignment and connection between excellence as my institution defines it and diversity that is important in achieving this excellence?
  - How do I define diversity? Why do I define it this way?
  - What is the relationship of diversity among my students to those goals?
An Admissions Framework for Excellence

AAMC Experiences-Attributes-Metrics Model

EXPERIENCES

ATTRIBUTES

METRICS

EXCELLENCE

2. Evidence

Benchmark: Does my institution maintain relevant evidence that affirms the relationship between educational excellence (as we define it) and the diversity that we seek?

- How do I know that there is a relationship between my institution's success regarding its goals and the diversity of our student body?
  - General research/social science
  - Institution-specific data/research
  - Institution-specific experiences
    - Anecdotal information, trends, etc.
2. Evidence cont'd

How do I know diversity factors materially contribute to the success of:

- The quality of education and student experience
- The promotion of highly skilled and knowledgeable workers in the 21st Century
- Civic-minded graduates who contribute to society
3. Coherence and Alignment

Benchmark: Are my institution's major enrollment policies and practices aligned around mission-based goals and clear diversity interests that are associated with educational excellence? Do we have a common view of "merit"?

- How do my institution's principal outreach, recruitment, admission, financial aid, and scholarship efforts and investments align with mission-based excellence and with each other?

- And, is our "elevator speech" the same in all institutional settings?
4. Transparency

Benchmark: Are my admission strategies and policies related to "merit" clearly articulated in a way that communicates the direct relevance to mission-related goals?

- How do I communicate goals, values and success?
- How do I frame opportunities and challenges faced by my institution?
  - How do I explain the complexities associated with multiple (sometimes competing) institutional objectives?
  - How do I explain the complexities associated with professional judgment?
- How do I explain the theory of action that connects my strategies/policies to desired outcomes?
5. Engagement

Benchmark: Have our admission professionals worked as a team to engage with key stakeholders regarding key issues, opportunities and challenges?

- Who are key stakeholders? What is their role? What is my objective with each group? What strategies?

- Do discussions reflect an honest dialogue regarding "the good" (vs. "the perfect") and efforts toward continuous improvement?
5. Engagement cont'd.

- Do I have clear and achievable strategies with respect to each group?
  - College/University governing/senior officials
  - Faculty
  - Parents and prospective students
  - Enrolled students
  - Alumni
  - Unusual suspects
    - 3d-party validators
    - Contrarians (see, e.g., faculty)
  - (Relevant) public
  - The press and social media outlets
6. Advocacy

Benchmark: Am I an effective advocate in helping my institution communicate its mission and the importance of admission judgments to that end?

- Do I have a clear sense of my institution's "end game?" (See #1: Goals)
  - Proactive/Reactive
  - Short-term/Long-term

- Am I making the most of efforts in #1-5 to enhance my advocacy strategy?
The (Overlooked) Court of Public Opinion

Voter Initiatives Passed
State Executive Order
Attempt for Initiative on Ballot Failed
State Statute
Voter Initiative Failed

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A Legal Postscript

Academic freedom. Discretion to determine, on academic grounds, who may be admitted to study, is “one of the ‘four essential freedoms’ of a university.”

--Justice Frankfurter (1954)

Excellence and Diversity: Not an Either-Or Proposition

Federal law "does not require a university to choose between maintaining a reputation for excellence or fulfilling a commitment to provide educational opportunities to members of all racial groups."

Model: The University of Michigan Law School Admissions Policy

- Six for Success: Compare!

- Key Points of Focus
  - An intuitive story line: marries data with anecdotes of direct relevance
    - Anecdotes demonstrate common values contextually applied [not one-sided political correctness; not black and white]
    - Role of data/evidence and judgment is clear
    - Tackles the hard questions around test scores/grades honestly
  - Fidelity to process evidencing rigor
“Justice must satisfy the appearance of justice.”

--Justice Felix Frankfurter (1954)
Please rate your agreement with the following statement for the three constituencies noted below from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree:

There is a common and clear understanding of the value and characteristics of diversity (merit in its broadest form) among the vast majority of my...

- Enrollment colleagues
- Leadership, including my trustees,
- The public we serve
PANELISTS REFLECT

- On the key issues...
  - What's missing?
  - What's particularly important?
  - Where do we excel?
  - ...and not? (And why not?)

- As we think about tomorrow...
  - What steps should we take to enhance the "six for success?"
  - Are there key strategies that we should more seriously consider?
  - Are there key partners that we're overlooking?
Conference Participants Grade Themselves
Clear Goals and Strategies

1. My institution should receive the grade of ___ on ESTABLISHING CLEAR GOALS AND STRATEGIES, as reflected below:

Benchmark: Does my institution clearly define its particular mission associated with educational excellence; and is the connection of that mission to diversity clear?
2. My institution should receive the grade of ___ for its ASSEMBLY, EVALUATION AND USE OF RELEVANT EVIDENCE ASSOCIATED WITH ENROLLMENT GOALS AND STRATEGIES as described below:

Benchmark: Does my institution maintain relevant evidence that affirms the relationship between educational excellence (as we define it) and the diversity that we seek?
Coherence and Alignment

3. My institution should receive the grade of __ regarding the COHERENCE AND ALIGNMENT OF ALL OF ITS ENROLLMENT POLICIES IN RELATION TO CLEAR GOALS, as reflected below:

Benchmark: Are my institution's major enrollment policies and practices aligned around mission-based goals and clear diversity interests that are associated with educational excellence? Do we have a common view of "merit??
4. My institution should receive the grade of ___ regarding its TRANSPARENCY IN COMMUNICATING A CLEAR STORYLINE REGARDING ENROLLMENT GOALS, STRATEGIES AND POLICIES, as suggested below:

**Benchmark:** Are my admission strategies and policies related to "merit" clearly articulated in a way that communicates the direct relevance to mission-related goals?
5. My institution should receive the grade of __ for its ENGAGEMENT WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS IMPORTANT TO OUR SUCCESS, as explained below:

Benchmark: Have our admission professionals worked to engage with key stakeholders regarding key issues, opportunities and challenges?
6. My institution should receive the grade of __ for its ADVOCACY RELATED TO ENROLLMENT STRATEGIES AND POLICIES, AND OUR SUCCESS.

Benchmark: Am I an effective advocate in helping my institution communicate its mission and the importance of admission judgments to that end?
DISCUSSION