

College Admissions

The college admissions process is a subject of controversy making the encompassing field of education a questionable yet worthwhile expenditure. College officials and students are directly affected by their surroundings and exposure to diversity, enunciating the importance of an application process that accommodates varying applicant traits. The conventional approach to college admissions is predominantly contingent upon a student's secondary academic success. Information such as standardized test scores and GPA account for a large portion of students' collegiate profiles. Because test scores shed little light into students' outside interests and personal qualities, the admissions process is now acknowledging other attributes that students have to offer. Motivated by the prospect of diversity and equal opportunity, colleges have implemented strategies to widen access for the socially, economically, and racially underprivileged. The point of contention is not ineffectiveness but unintentional favoritism, which arguably go hand in hand. Through unintentional favoritism, the college admissions process is ineffective in creating the environment it intends.

The standardized testing system has been a part of American college admissions since the first test was created in 1900 (Ferguson). For some large colleges the tests can be a quick way to get through the application process, by quickly eliminating some of the lower scorers. Others have started to fight this system, stating that intelligence and creativity cannot be accurately shown in a single test. Some smaller colleges, about 850, have become test optional, and a few do not even accept any type of standardized testing (Westervelt).

For some students, the test is just another thing to worry about. Maintaining a high GPA in school can be stressful for students alone; the test just adds pressure. A student living on upper east side Manhattan who graduated in 2013 became so stressed out about standardized tests she had a panic attack in her junior year (Lewin). She went to see a therapist over the test, something not very common for high schoolers, but nonetheless slightly concerning. For other students, they can feel the test is a better indicator of their intelligence and potential for college success than their GPA. The test is more of an equal playing field than high school because it is unbiased by teachers or academic rigor. This was what the original test was created for: to find “diamonds in the rough” or students who can succeed academically but have had difficult teachers (Ferguson).

In a report by Hiss, who was a Bates admissions officer, he compared GPA and graduation rates of students who did not submit test scores versus those who did, finding that those who did not submit their test scores do not have a significant difference in graduation rates or GPA, statistically (Westervelt). Slightly opposing this, the SAT claims that more information is better for the college admission officers (Costello). This may be true, but since the difference in success between test submitters and those who did not submit is very small, some question if the tests are necessary at all (Westervelt). From the viewpoint of a College Board member, the company who runs the SAT, they may feel the test is very helpful to colleges to understand applicants better. However, they likely have a favoritism for the test due to fact they will be out of a job if the test ceases to exist. The argument for more information is valid; however, since the extra information can be so taxing on some students, it's necessity is often questioned.

As opposed to the average student, athletes have a unique perspective on the college admissions process because they are evaluated for their ability both in the classroom and in their sport. Because of this, inferior students are often admitted because of their physical talents. While this may seem unfair to rejected applicants, it is in the interest of the school to remain competitive in athletics.

The largest incentive to admit great athletes is their ability to bring money into the school. Athletes generate revenue from ticket sales, media rights, branding, and increase in donations. This accumulates to what has become a sixteen billion dollar market, with the majority of the profits coming from football and basketball. With so much money at stake, athletes of higher revenue sports gain the most awards in scholarships, leeway in academics, and other benefits of being a student athlete. This could understandably frustrate athletes of less popular sports as they feel their benefits are not based on merit in their sport, but on public value of their talents. Unfortunately for these athletes, college athletics is a business, and it is treated as such.

Eager to earn the profits of college athletics, some universities admit vastly under-qualified students. This was most famously uncovered by Mary Willingham at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In her study, she found that a majority of athletes read between a fourth and eighth-grade level, with a significant portion below a third-grade level. This extreme influence in admissions compromises the academic integrity of the school and frustrates rejected applicants.

While academic scandals concern many about the culture of college sports, those untroubled by the system assert that athletes add to the culture and image of a school, which is an

asset regardless of what goes on in the classroom. Many students place emphasis on quality athletics when judging the social atmosphere of a university. This is highlighted in a phenomenon known as the “Flutie Effect”, which describes the dramatic increase in applicants to a school after a successful year in sports. According to Harvard Business School graduate Doug Chung, “When a school rises from mediocre to great on the gridiron, applicants increased by 18.7 percent.” Increased applications allow schools to be more selective and are a valuable benefit provided by athletes.

Countering the idea of improving the image of a school, many scholars highlight the increasing rate of crime among student athletes as yet another reason they should lose favor in the admissions process. Indeed many top tier athletic programs have an embarrassing record of behavior. “While male student- athletes comprise 3.3% of the population, they represent 19% of sexual assault perpetrators and 35% of domestic violence perpetrators” (Benedict/Crosset Study). This trend is worsening and seems likely to continue for top programs as 20% of college football recruits in the top 25 Division I teams have criminal records (Benedict/Crosset Study).

The amount of favor athletes deserve in the admissions process is highly contested. Great athletes can show the school in a positive light and increase its reputation similar to, or often more so, than great scholars. If an athlete is going to class and making right choices while simultaneously generating revenue and promoting the school brand, they are priceless assets to any university. However, if these expectations are not met, they have no right to be admitted over academically superior students.

Similar to athletic favoritism, minorities are sought after in the admissions process due to their diversifying qualities. Race-based admissions policies were implemented to not only

prevent against racial discrimination, but also promote diversity on campus. In attempts to eliminate race-based prejudices while deciding admissions, discrimination of the opposite race seems to have arisen. This is evident when examining the case of Abigail Fisher, a caucasian female, who feels that her rejection from the University of Texas was based on her racial status. The validity of her argument is questionable however, because of the academic weaknesses in her application. Although her claim may not be completely accurate in the accusations it makes, it still presents the perspective of the caucasian applicant and their interpretation of rejection.

Promotion of diversity is also accountable for the race-based admissions process adjustments. Diversity is a key part of the college experience because real world conditions must be simulated to ensure that students are prepared for life following graduation. While race is integral in maintaining a successfully diverse environment, it must be noted that it is not the exclusive factor. Although race certainly contributes to creating an effectively diverse environment, it cannot be held solely responsible for establishing such conditions. From the perspective of the minority, the racial favoritism that occurs in the college admissions process is viewed by some as fairly excessive. African-Americans, Hispanics, and whites were all asked by Jeffrey Jones and his team with the Gallup Poll whether they felt that ethnic background should play a role in determining college admission. Its results showed that in supporting admissions based solely on merit, 59% of Hispanics and 44% of African-Americans voted that policies such as affirmative action were unnecessary. This reflects how minorities are either uneducated on the way that this is intended to help them, or that they do not want the favoritism that such a policy entails.

The gap between minority enrollment and graduation rates is concerning when evaluating the effectiveness of race-based admissions. Bowdoin College, an elite liberal-arts school in Brunswick, Maine, reports a 90% graduation rate for whites compared to a 70% rate for African-Americans; the state school University of Northern Iowa graduated 69% of white students, but only 39% of African-Americans (Thomas). Affirmative action has been commonly blamed for this gap because minority students are not equipped for the academic rigor of college. They struggle more than their fellow classmates because their admission is primarily based on race and socioeconomic status; their lower test scores and grade point averages have been overlooked in promotion of diversity. These obstacles for minorities to overcome following admissions makes policies such as affirmative action questionable in their effectiveness. Because of the concerns raised by colleges admitting applicants solely based on race, Supreme Court rulings have banned racial quotas, but still support the idea of a diverse campus. In order to meet this goal, weights have been placed on application factors indirectly correlated to race. Socioeconomic status is commonly associated with race. To admit ethnically diverse applicants and simultaneously avoid racial quotas, top 10-percent programs in Texas automatically admit the top 10% of all high schools into any university in Texas. This helps minorities that have proven themselves as driven and dedicated students but live in low-income communities to be admitted. Consequently, it bypasses similar or more qualified middle-class applicants of different ethnicities just because they do not fall in the top ten percentile at their high school. The unjust realization is that the expectation of merit for any school is being compromised to accommodate racial barriers.

Essentially every component of the college admissions process can be examined through a socioeconomic lens as it influences every aspect of an applicant's life. Initially, the contents of an applicant's transcript are largely dependent on their economic status. Well-to-do, educated parents contribute largely to the academic success of their children from a very early age in a way that parents with limited resources cannot. When coupled with the discrepancies between the quality of instruction in areas of poverty compared to those of greater wealth, applicants of wealthier backgrounds are significantly advantaged. Additionally, the weight of test scores favors applicants of higher income as studies have shown that standardized tests contain elements of high-class culture. There is a visible income-achievement gap caused by such test biases. In evaluating the SAT scores of 2009 it was found that, "moving up an income category was associated with an average score boost of over 12 points" (Rampell). Even the components of college applications intended to judge the character and personality of students favor applicants with the resources and connections to participate in impressive extracurricular activities. Students with jobs, limited transportation, and a lack of expendable income are disadvantaged when presenting an application that does not appear "well rounded".

Following acceptance into a university, families of applicants are faced with the current affordability crisis as tuition and additional college expenses skyrocket. College tuition has increased 1120 percent in the United States over the last 30 years ("The Big"). The subsequent decrease in access to a higher education widens the national stratification of wealth and restricts social mobility. As tuition increases, however, so does the prevalence of financial aid. The bulk of this comes from federal grants such as the nationwide "Free Application for Federal Student Aid" or FAFSA which account for 44 percent of financial aid (Vo). Though the growth of

need-based scholarships is noteworthy, the aid granted is not proportional to the rising cost of a higher education. The net price has indeed grown, but at a slower rate than that of colleges' sticker prices. In turn, there is a greater requirement for student loans as more and more students leave college with debt. Student loans have grown 511 percent since 1999 (Indiviglio); Americans now have \$867 billion of student debt, surpassing both nationwide automobile loans and credit card debt (Vo).

The combination of a biased admissions system and an affordability crisis initially deter the enrollment of lower-income students. If such students do attend a conventional 4-year university they have decreased odds of graduation and are likely to accumulate stifling student loans. Advocates of the current inequitable system of college admissions tend to be proponents of the American capitalist sentiment that greatly benefits a minority of Americans. However unjust, the present process cannot be fully debunked as its motives are not to exclude applicants of a certain demographic, but rather to select for a gifted and well-prepared student body. The contingency of quality education and wealth is a byproduct of exclusivity based evaluation of merit.

In order to show a universalised merit, many colleges are beginning to realize academic excellence is not the only important asset a prospective student may have to offer and are searching for ways to alter their application processes to illuminate student's creative skill sets.

For example, Goucher college has started accepting video submissions in place of the common SAT or ACT scores and high school transcripts (Carlotti). While these videos give outgoing students a leg up on the competition, Brian Rosenberg, president of Macalester college

believes that the video submissions are a disservice to students because they implicitly neglect the academic record of a student's high school career (PErez-peNa).

Because of instantaneous information that can easily be found on social networking sites, colleges are actively looking into student accounts as an unofficial reference to that persons attributes. Jeff Schiffman, associate director of admissions at Tulane University, has seen an influx of students connecting with him through LinkedIn and advocates students use the hashtag of their prospective college to show off interesting Tumblr blogs, Twitter accounts, and Youtube channels. In opposition, Bradley Shear, social media lawyer, worries that false accounts online could be sending the wrong information to admissions department, seeing as not everything online is fact (Singer). Using social media highlights that admissions counselors are attempting to relate with upcoming generations in a more contemporary way, however the under the table observations could serve as favoritism that decrease social media's legitimacy in the realm of education.

A new way of evaluating college students is through the use of assessment centers, which can test how well a student takes on leadership roles and works in a group setting, skills essential to the college experience. The assessment center has long been in use to evaluate military personnel and CIA officials, and today large companies such as General Electric and AT&T use it for hiring management personnel. Even though Lipscomb University has found creating assessment centers requires a substantial financial initiative they argue the costs are minimized by student application fees and the results are worth the initial setback (Fain).

In contrast, many college officials say the use of transcripts and SAT or ACT scores is just as accurate because the training strategies and bootcamps students now use to dominate the

SAT or ACT will unfortunately, over the years, translate to expensive assessment prep classes to help students outshine others not based on personality but privilege (“A Better”). Jack Buckley, senior vice president of research for The College Board asserts that a student’s GPA and standardized test scores are the best indicator for college success (“Temple dumps”). Traditional GPA and test scores give more reserved students a chance to shine whereas in assessment centers social skills are at the center of attention.

Because students can receive extra help on alternative college application processes as well as standardized tests and essays, alternative methods of college application seem to have been swept under the rug. High school transcripts show valuable insight into a person’s work ethic and serve as an organized way of evaluating students; however, a personal interaction from a prospective student sheds light on qualities paper can’t even begin to do justice. Going beyond the text to find important underlying layers is a skill essential to education and should be reflected in the college application process.

A justified college application process must evolve with changes in societal values. With the recent push for a more varied learning environment, colleges are attempting to reach out to students with alternative backgrounds and talents. The traditional application is comprised of components including academic achievements, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and extra curricular activities. In summation, there are positives to the current college admissions process but also negatives. We believe our solution would combat the current negatives, although implementing and transferring the majority of colleges to this solution would be difficult.

Overall, our main solution would be to have college counselors and to implement a top ten percent rule for state colleges. The college counselors would be employed by high schools and

would get to know the students personally. This would aid in helping students choose the right college, rather than wasting time with extra applications or going to a college that does not completely fit the student. We also recommend that colleges experiment with alternative methods of applications such as video submissions or assessment centers in order to reach out to more creatively versed students.

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