ON CAMPUS

Why Applying to College Is So Confusing

Credit Liam Hopkins/ArtCenter College of Design

By Rebecca Zwick
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The annual college applications frenzy is upon us — a season when high school students agonize over G.P.A.s and personal essays, hoping and praying that they will stand out among throngs of applicants.

The anxiety among applicants about how to present themselves to universities is very visible online. Websites have sprung up to advise students on, say, whether teacher recommendations make a difference or whether to write about money in a college essay. One website, College Confidential, has offered a seminar in which you "learn what admission officials discuss behind closed doors" but "may not tell you in the information session." Desperate applicants ask other site visitors — complete strangers — to "chance" them, or estimate the likelihood they will be admitted to their dream college.

This degree of bewilderment is troubling, but not surprising.

Colleges themselves have widely diverging views on what makes an ideal applicant. It's a widespread misconception that applicants have an automatic right to be admitted to the school of their choice if they have higher grades or test scores than other candidates. It's not that grades and test scores don't matter — they nearly always do — but colleges aren't obligated to choose the students who are deemed most likely to earn high college grades or graduate. As the legal scholar Ronald Dworkin put it, there is "no combination of abilities and skills and traits that constitutes 'merit' in the abstract."

Instead, what counts in admissions depends on the mission of the institution — and that can vary a great deal from school to school. The State University of New York, for example, strives to "provide to the people of New York educational services of the highest quality, with the broadest possible access, fully representative of all segments of the population." Yale's mission, on the other hand, is "to seek exceptionally promising students of all backgrounds" and "to educate them, through mental discipline and social experience, to develop their intellectual, moral, civic and creative capacities to the fullest."

One of those institutions is seeking, in part, to represent the population of New York. The other is looking for the most extraordinary students in the country. Both make admission decisions accordingly.

Mission statements don't necessarily make it easier for students to understand the nuts and bolts of admissions, but they are absolutely vital. A school's admissions policy must flow from its mission.

But by and large, colleges aren't doing a good enough job explaining to applicants how admissions choices stem from their policy. While most colleges list some of the factors they consider in admission — such as leadership and involvement in extracurricular activities — they need to go further to explain how applicant characteristics are assessed and weighted.

Admissions officers will readily point out that complete transparency is not possible — and that's true. Colleges that explicitly state their preferences for under-represented racial groups, for example, risk running afoul of the Supreme Court, and in some cases, state prohibitions.

But right now, the guidance they do give is far too opaque. Consider some of the questions Harvard says it uses to consider applicants: Where will you be in one, five or 25 years? What sort of human being will you be in the future? Are you a late bloomer? Do you have reserve power to do more?

To be clear, these aren't questions for the candidates themselves to answer. They are among the questions that the admissions officers ask themselves about prospective students based on their applications.

Applicants, for their part, are left to wonder how Harvard admissions officers might infer the answers and what the right answers might be. And further, how important are these questions relative to more traditional factors, such as grades, test scores and extracurricular activities?

Likewise, the University of California lists intellectual curiosity as a desirable applicant characteristic. That seems reasonable, but how is it evaluated? The university also considers disabilities, difficult personal and family situations, and low income, among other criteria. How much do these factors count? Do students score points for a parental divorce or a childhood illness?

Even those who have a role in making decisions can find this frustrating. A former Berkeley applications reader wrote several years ago that because of the lack of explicit rules for judging candidates, "the process of detecting objective factors of disadvantage becomes tricky."

Sociological research suggests that the fuzzier the admissions criteria, the greater the disadvantage suffered by low-income students and others who are less familiar with university culture. Thus, admissions officers seeking to diversify their freshman classes would benefit from being more transparent about their expectations.

How could admissions offices be more open about how they choose? They could start by publishing vignettes to illustrate how admissions decisions are made, spell out why certain kinds of applicant profiles do or don't make the grade, and describe how they identify talented students who fall short in terms of grades or test scores.

Descriptions of the kinds of complex deliberations conducted by real admissions committees would be enlightening to both applicants and their families.

Colleges don't need to tell all. But a more comprehensive explanation of what drives their choices would go a long way toward lifting the veil from a system that many regard as an impenetrable mystery.

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