

Why Has College Admissions Become So Competitive?

Applying to college was a pretty simple process for members of the Baby Boom generation born between 1946 and 1964. Those bound for a four-year college usually planned to go to a school in their home state or one fairly close by; a college 300 miles from home was considered by many to be far away. Few students felt the need to apply to more than two or three colleges, and many applied to just one. College choices were most often based on location, program offerings, cost, and difficulty of admission, with a parental alma mater sometimes thrown in for good measure. For the most part, the whole process was fairly low-key. If students did their homework carefully before deciding where to apply, the outcome was usually predictable. Of course there were surprises—some pleasant and some disappointing—but nothing that would raise the issue of college admissions to the level of a national obsession.

It Used to Be Simple . . . But Not Anymore

Fast forward to the early years of the twenty-first century. Newspapers headlines tell a story that is very different for students applying to college now. “Competition grows intense in college admissions game—More qualified students being

rejected as applications soar,”¹ “Colleges reject top applicants, accepting only the students likely to enroll,”² “The college admissions game: Fear, uncertainty plague students and parents,”³ “College parents ‘out of control’—aggressive tactics may hurt students’ shot at admission,”⁴ “Fluent in French, 3.9 GPA, and UCLA still said no—Even top grades no longer enough for choice UC schools,”⁵ “More parents are hiring pros to coach kids for admission.”⁶

Colleges themselves make announcements that are equally jarring. In spring 2003, Harvard announced that for the first time it had accepted just under 10 percent of the students who applied for freshman admission for the class of 2007, or about 2,000 out of 21,000 applicants. Princeton made a similar announcement. Offers of admission were sent to about 1,600 students out of a pool of over 15,700. On the other coast, UCLA, a public university, reported that it had extended offers of admissions to just over 24 percent of the 45,000 students who applied for freshman admission, the lowest admit rate in its history. UCLA’s northern California neighbor, Stanford University, also reported an admissions rate lower than ever before—12.1 percent. These were just a few of the many colleges reporting record-breaking numbers of applications and record low rates of admission, continuing a trend that began several years earlier. What happened to change the college admissions picture in such a dramatic way?

The Echo Boom

The simple explanation for the claim that it is harder to get into four-year colleges now than ever before seems to be supply and demand: there are more high school graduates than ever competing for seats in the freshman class. After declining somewhat in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of students graduating from high school in the United States has risen steadily each year since. In 1994 there were 2.5 million graduates; in 2003, there were 2.9 million. Projections call for steady growth through 2009, when the number of high school graduates will reach almost 3.2 million.

Part of the increase is the result of immigration, especially from Asia and Latin America, but most of the growth is attributable to the children of the Baby Boom generation that created the great demand for higher education in the decades after World War II. Known as the “echo boomers” or the Millennials, these children will be part of the largest group of high school graduates ever. And although there

will be a slight decline from the 2009 peak in subsequent years, the number of high school graduates will remain above 3 million through at least 2018.⁷

Social Changes

But it turns out that the problem is not just numbers. Important social changes have taken place as well. Not only are there more students graduating from high school each year, but a greater percentage of them are interested in going to college. A college education is increasingly seen as key to economic success in our society in the same way that a high school diploma was once the minimum requirement. Studies confirm the value of a college diploma in terms of life-long earnings, and many desirable careers require education beyond the bachelor's degree. As a result, more students are seeking to attend four-year colleges, including students from underrepresented minority groups whose college participation rate was previously low.

"I don't think anyone is complacent about getting a high-quality applicant pool."

Harvard University admissions officer

At the same time that more students are seriously considering going to college, colleges themselves have increased their efforts to attract large, diverse pools of applicants. Many have mounted aggressive programs to spread the word about their offerings nationally and internationally. Colorful "viewbooks" mailed directly to students, visits to high schools by admissions officers, college nights at local hotels, and information booths at college fairs are among the ways colleges are reaching out to prospective freshmen.

Started in earnest in the 1980s when the number of college-age students began to drop temporarily, these marketing efforts have continued and expanded even as student numbers have grown. They are used not only by colleges that may have problems filling their freshman class but also by colleges with an overabundance of qualified applicants. Colleges want to attract the most academically qualified, talented, and diverse applicants from which to select their freshman class, and they often go to great lengths to do it. One result of all these efforts is that more and more college-bound students have become aware of, and are willing to seriously consider, colleges in other parts of the country.

The Role of the Internet

The Internet has also played a major role in how students approach college admissions. Although printed material and in-person presentations are important ways for students to learn about different colleges, the Web is the #1 source of information for students who have grown up online. Students can “visit” campuses through sophisticated online tours and Web-cams and can get many of their questions answered by “frequently asked questions” posted on the Web. Colleges have invested heavily in the development of attractive, easy-to-use Web sites to showcase themselves.

Finally, the Internet has made it easier than ever to apply to college. Students no longer have to send for applications, wait for them to arrive in the mail, and then fill them out by hand. Forms can be downloaded from many college sites or, better yet, completed and submitted directly online, saving some of the time and effort that a traditional paper application requires. Some colleges even waive their application fee (usually in the \$40 to \$70 range) for those who submit their forms over the Internet. Simplifying things even more, over 250 colleges now accept the

“As word spreads about the competition for college admission, students respond by applying to even more colleges to increase their chances of acceptance. In so doing, they end up unwittingly contributing to the very problem they are trying to solve for themselves.”

High school counselor concerned about the trend

Common Application, a standardized form that can be filled out once (often along with a school-specific supplement) and submitted electronically or by mail to as many of the participating colleges as a student wishes. With admission less certain, students are now submitting more applications than ever. Eight to ten applications are

now the norm at many private schools and high-performing public high schools—twelve to fifteen or more applications are not uncommon.

These factors taken together—growth in the population of eighteen-year-olds, greater interest in college, sophisticated marketing efforts, and ease of access to information and the ability to apply made possible by the Internet—help explain why it seems to be harder to get into college now than ever before.

But this is not the whole answer.

Where the Real Crunch Lies

Most people are surprised to learn that with relatively few exceptions, four-year colleges in the United States still accept most, if not all, of their applicants. In fact,

each year many fully accredited four-year colleges have vacancies well into the summer for their freshman class that begins in the fall. Despite all the social and demographic changes we have just considered, there are still ample spots for prospective freshmen in four-year colleges. How can this fact be reconciled with the newspaper headlines (not to mention first-hand reports from students and parents) that there is a crisis in college admissions?

It turns out that the real crunch in admissions—the crunch that drives the newspaper headlines and the anxiety that afflicts many families at college application time—is limited to about 100 colleges that attract applicants from all over the country and the world and that are the most selective in their admissions process. Bill Mayher, a private college counselor and author of *The College Admissions Mystique*, summarizes the problem succinctly: “It’s hard for kids to get into colleges because they only want to get into colleges that are hard to get into.”⁸

Which Colleges Are the Most Selective?

The percentage of students offered admission to a college is a major factor in determining its selectivity. The other factor affecting selectivity at a given college is the academic strength of the applicant pool. Both play a role, since applicants tend to “self-select” when applying to certain colleges known for their academic rigor. To simplify things for our discussion here, however, we will define selectivity in terms of admissions rate only, and focus on colleges that admit fewer than half of those who apply. We’ll further divide the group into three categories—super-selective colleges (those admitting less than 20 percent of applicants), highly selective colleges (those admitting less than 35 percent of applicants), and very selective colleges (those that admit less than 50 percent of applicants). These are artificial boundaries, but they give a sense of the relative difficulty of gaining admission.

Even though over 2,000 four-year institutions of higher education in the United States admit 50 percent or more of those who apply (and most admit more than 80 percent), many students focus their attention on these 100 selective colleges that fall into one of the three groups we have just defined. A rough estimate is that about 250,000 students applied to one or more of these “elite” colleges to be part of the class of 2007.⁹ That number is likely to rise for the next several years as the population of high school graduates continues to grow.

The students applying to selective colleges are the ones experiencing the “crisis” in college admissions. The crisis does not affect those applying to community

Colleges by Admission Rate for the Class of 2007

Super-Selective (less than 20 percent of applicants admitted)

Amherst College	Dartmouth College	Princeton University
Brown University	Harvard University	Stanford University
Cal Tech	MIT	Yale University
Columbia University		

Highly Selective (less than 35 percent of applicants admitted)

Barnard College	Georgetown University	Pomona College
UC Berkeley	Hamilton College	Rice University
Boston College	Haverford College	University of Southern California
Bowdoin College	Johns Hopkins University	Swarthmore College
Carleton College	UCLA	Tufts University
Claremont McKenna College	Middlebury College	Vassar College
Colby College	New York University	Washington University
Colgate University	Northwestern University	Washington and Lee University
Cornell University	University of Notre Dame	Wesleyan University
Davidson College	University of Pennsylvania	College of William and Mary
Duke University	Pepperdine University	Williams College

Very Selective Colleges (less than 50 percent of applicants admitted)

Bard College	Kenyon College	UC San Diego
Binghamton University	Lafayette College	Sarah Lawrence College
Brandeis University	Lehigh University	Skidmore College
Bucknell University	Macalester College	Spelman College
Carnegie Mellon University	University of Maryland	University of Texas
University of Chicago	University of Miami	Trinity College (CT)
Connecticut College	Muhlenberg College	Union College
University of Delaware	Northeastern University	Vanderbilt University
Emory University	University of North Carolina	University of Virginia
Gettysburg College	Oberlin College	Wake Forest University
George Washington University	Occidental College	Washington and Jefferson College
Harvey Mudd College	University of Pittsburgh	Wellesley College
College of the Holy Cross	Reed College	Wheaton College (MA)
Illinois Wesleyan University	University of Rochester	

colleges or those seeking admission to one or more of the many colleges that accept most or all of their applicants. It is a crisis of limited scope that affects only a small percentage of high school seniors overall. Nevertheless, it is very real to those who are applying to these selective colleges now or expect to apply in the next few years. If you are reading this book, you (or your child) may be one of them. Keep reading. Our book is designed to help you. If you'll be applying to less selective schools, keep reading as well. Most of what we have to share in this book will help you, too.

Why Is There So Much Interest in Such a Small Group of Colleges?

What is behind such intense interest in a small group of colleges and universities? Why, in particular, is there a mystique surrounding the colleges included in the "Ivy League," as well as a few others accorded similar status? What benefits do these elite colleges bestow (or do people believe they bestow) on their graduates?

Prestige, of course, is one obvious answer. By definition, the more selective a college, the more difficult it is to get into and the greater the prestige associated with being admitted. The student enjoys the prestige directly (after all, the student is the one who was admitted!), but parents enjoy prestige by association. In a society that is becoming

"I was happy and proud when my son was accepted at Stanford. I quickly became embarrassed, though, by the gushing responses I received when friends asked where he was going. He had just been accepted to college, after all—he had not won the Nobel Prize. Things have gotten rather warped."

Parent of Stanford freshman

"Lots of times it's kids, I think, trying to define themselves by their school choice, not so much choosing the school that's right for them, but trying to look good through it. I'm not sure if they get it from parents or from other kids or from teachers. But they get it from somewhere."

Volunteer in counseling office at private high school

increasingly status conscious, surely going to a college ranked #5 is better than going to one ranked #10 or #80 or one that your friends never heard of. Or is it? Prestige is often important to parents who equate brand name with quality or who may find themselves, often unconsciously, attracted to the pleasure of being a "winner."

“Harvard is perhaps the most overrated institution of higher learning in America. This is not to imply that Harvard isn’t a good school — on the contrary, Harvard is an excellent school. But its reputation creates an unattainable standard; no school could ever be as good as most people think Harvard is.”

Comment by Harvard student

as the basis for their interest in an elite college. But this rationale is often based on the unstated, and often unexamined, assumption that a good indicator of the quality of something is how much others seek it. In the case of colleges, this means that selective institutions are presumed to offer a better education; the more selective, the higher the quality. But is this true?

Take the eight colleges that comprise the Ivy League, for example—Harvard University, Yale University, Princeton University, Brown University, Dartmouth College, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, and Columbia University. The Ivy League originally referred only to a group of colleges that comprised a football league. (Only seven colleges were included in the group at first. Brown University was eventually selected as the eighth member, although several other colleges were considered possibilities at the time.) Over time, though, Ivy League colleges have become known among the general public primarily for academics rather than athletics and are accorded high prestige. Each Ivy has an ad-

“Some kids want that acceptance letter to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton so desperately, but they really do not know why except to impress family, friends, whomever. It is one thing to include prestige as a factor in your list of schools. It is a problem when it becomes the only factor, and I am seeing this more and more.”

Private counselor concerned about the emphasis on prestige

missions rate that places it in the super-selective or highly selective category, and each has renowned faculty as well as an accomplished student body. Everyone agrees that they are fine institutions, but do the Ivies automatically offer undergraduates an educational experience that is superior to that at many other institutions? The answer, well known in academic circles but surprising to many others, is assuredly no.

Although some people openly acknowledge considering prestige in college choice, many more will cite the quality of the educational experience



Marion's Confession

What I have long viewed as my toughest job as a parent came into play, perhaps more powerfully than ever, during the college application process.

I had to fight the part of me that wants to use my children to feel good about myself. Put more baldly, I had to fight the part of me that wants to show off.

Let me explain.

Many years ago, when my children were toddlers, I confessed to a counselor that I looked forward to the day when their pictures would appear in the newspaper. Our newspaper is small and local, and it runs frequent photographs of students holding artwork, playing soccer, or receiving awards. I wanted to see my children's smiling faces on those pages. I knew it would feel good somehow, and I couldn't wait.

When I finished telling this to my counselor, she responded very seriously. "What I am about to say is really important. Don't live through your children's accomplishments. If you want to be in the newspaper, do it yourself."

I took that advice home and followed it, to the best of my ability. All through my children's primary school years, I worked hard not to bask in their accomplishments. When their pictures did appear in the newspaper, usually for musical events, I smiled but I didn't go ape.

When other people's children appeared in the newspaper holding huge shiny trophies, when I felt a shimmer of jealousy in spite of myself, I remembered the words of my counselor. "If you want to be in the newspaper, do it yourself." I actually contacted the paper and submitted a few things.

Then it came time for my children to apply to college and my internal struggle bubbled up again. I fought it. I did not pressure my children to apply to big name schools. I talked about the value of finding a place that felt good, fancy name or not.

It helped that in between the newspaper had called and hired me as a columnist.

They run my photo every week.

M. F.

The Importance of Fit

This book will not attempt to dissuade you if prestige is important to you in selecting a college—you have a lot of company. What we will do, however, is talk about many other dimensions that are important to consider in selecting colleges. We believe that the college admissions process should be about fit—the fit between a student and a college. Many factors besides prestige go into determining fit, and we will talk about them at length in Chapter Four and encourage you to think carefully about

them. You may find, in the end, that you are making the same choices as you would have before, but we believe your choices will be more informed. You may even find yourself seriously considering other options of which you had been unaware. Either outcome is fine—our goal is simply to help you understand as much as possible about the college admissions process so that you can make the best choices for you.

The Rankings Game

A major contributor to the mystique of selective colleges has been the annual rankings of colleges published by *U.S. News and World Report*. Their first rankings, published in 1983, were based on surveys of college administrators. Over time, the

“I am extremely skeptical that the quality of a university—any more than the quality of a magazine—can be measured statistically. However, even if it can, the producers of the *U.S. News* rankings remain far from discovering the method.”¹⁰

*Gerhard Casper, former president
of Stanford University*

rankings proved to be so popular that they outgrew the magazine itself. *U.S. News and World Report* now publishes a separate guidebook, “America’s Best Colleges,” each August that includes information and advice about applying to college in addition to college rankings based on a mix of reputation and statistical data about the colleges. The yearly rankings, though, remain at the

heart of “America’s Best Colleges,” generating great attention among readers and great controversy among those who believe the ranking process is fundamentally flawed.

Gerhard Casper, while president of Stanford University, expressed his concern about the rankings to the editor of *U.S. News and World Report* as follows: “As the president of a university that is among the top-ranked universities, I hope I have the standing to persuade you that much about these rankings—particularly their specious formulas and spurious precision—is utterly misleading. I wish I could forgo this letter since, after all, the rankings are only another newspaper story. Alas, alumni, foreign newspapers, and many others do not bring a sense of perspective to the matter.”¹¹

What Goes into the Rankings

Twenty-five percent of a college’s ranking in the *U.S. News* survey is based on reputational ratings it receives in the poll of college presidents, provosts, and admissions deans that the magazine conducts each year. These administrators are simply

asked to rate the academic quality of undergraduate programs at schools with the same mission as their own (for example, liberal arts colleges or research universities) on a 1–5 scale from “marginal” to “distinguished,” with the option to respond “don’t know.” Many of those who receive the questionnaire acknowledge that they don’t have the kind of detailed information about other colleges that would be needed to respond meaningfully.

The remaining 75 percent of a college’s ranking in the *U.S. News* survey is based on data collected in five different categories, each weighted in the final calculation as follows: retention and graduation rate (20 percent), faculty resources (20 percent), student selectivity (15 percent), financial resources (10 percent), alumni giving (5 percent), and graduation rate performance (5 percent).¹²

Each of these five categories, in turn, contains several submeasures. For example, *U.S. News* has defined student selectivity as being composed of several factors for the freshman class—admission rate, the twenty-fifth and seventy-fifth percentile of SAT or ACT scores, the percentage of students in the top 10 percent of their high school class and, until it was dropped from the formula in 2003, something called “yield.” The yield at a given college is simply the percentage of students offered admission who actually accept admission and subsequently enroll. A high yield is seen as better than a low yield, since it implies that those who are accepted by a college are eager to attend, presumably because it is a great place to be.

“ I am delighted to announce that, for the third year in a row, [our college] has been placed in the top tier of its category by *U.S. News and World Report*. While we continue to be suspect of the rankings, this is still a very promising position for the College.”¹³

Letter posted by college president on campus Web site following release of the U.S. News rankings

The *U.S. News* Formula

All of this information is collected annually and put into a formula that assigns weightings to the different kinds of data and then computes an overall “ranking.” To avoid comparing apples with oranges, *U.S. News* ranks campuses in relation to those with the same mission, so that research universities and liberal arts colleges, for example, are ranked separately. (We’ll talk about the differences between these two kinds of institutions in Chapter Four when we look at factors to consider in choosing colleges.) The staff of *U.S. News* determines what factors are included in the formula and how much each one is weighted in the final outcome. Each year

the magazine slightly modifies the formula it uses, ostensibly to improve its usefulness as a tool to assess educational quality but also to sell the rankings as “new and improved.”

One consequence of these changes is that a college’s ranking can shift fairly significantly from one year to the next simply as a result of changes in the formula used to compute the ratings. In 1998, for example, the California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech) ranked #9 among research universities. Following changes in the formula, Cal Tech moved to #1 in 1999. The next year the formula changed again, returning Cal Tech to a less prominent position. A few years earlier, the Johns Hopkins University moved, over the course of three years, from #22 to #10 to #15. Over the same time period, Columbia University moved from #9 to #15 to #11. Did the quality of these universities relative to their peers really change over these short periods? Of course not. Critics of the rankings argue that meaningful changes in college quality are not possible over a period as short as one year, and that formula changes are primarily designed to keep interest in the rankings high and sell more magazines.

Concerns About Rankings

The *U.S. News* rankings are very popular with the general public, particularly parents, and are a source of joy or frustration for colleges themselves, depending on a college’s ranking in a given year. The most important criticism of the rankings is that they are not based on any direct measures of educational quality or student satisfaction. Educators readily acknowledge that educational quality and student satisfaction per se can be hard to assess and tricky to put into numbers, but there *are* ways to measure them directly.

For the last several years, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) based at Indiana University has attempted to measure quality and satisfaction by asking students direct questions about their educational experiences and how they spend their time. *U.S. News* has started to report some data from the NSSE in its “America’s Best Colleges” issue, although the results are not counted in the calculation of the rankings. Unfortunately, many highly regarded colleges have chosen not to participate in NSSE, including most selective ones as we have defined them. And some colleges that do participate do not make the results public. Even though NSSE is not used or reported as broadly as it might be, we think it is important for you to know about it, since it gives you an idea of the kinds of dimensions that are

Representative Questions from the National Survey on Student Engagement

1. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas:
 - a. Acquiring a broad general education
 - b. Writing clearly and effectively
 - c. Thinking critically and analytically
 - d. Learning effectively on your own
 - e. Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds
 2. Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution?
 3. In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following (rated from “very often” to “never” along a four-point scale)
 - a. Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussion
 - b. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources
 - c. Discussed ideas about your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class
 4. If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending? (rated from “definitely yes” to “definitely no” along a four-point scale)
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Used with permission from Indiana University.

important in assessing educational quality. You can learn more about NSSE and see the colleges that have chosen to participate at www.indiana.edu/~nsse/.

Critics have pointed out that while the variables used by *U.S. News* can be contributors to educational quality (perhaps higher salaries lead to better faculty and smaller classes mean more personal attention), educators have not reached agreement about how those variables can be used to measure the quality of a college.

And to make things worse, some of the factors that are used in the *U.S. News* formula can be manipulated. As much as colleges disparage the ranking process and see its flaws, the *U.S. News* rankings are too high profile and too influential among the general public for colleges to ignore them. Alumni, boards of trustees, and even bond-rating agencies on Wall Street are also very much aware of the rankings and expect to see “improvement.” Under pressure, some colleges take active steps to do better.

One common but harmless approach is the production of elegant, full-color booklets that typically highlight a college’s new programs and facilities, as well as its ambitious plans for the future. In addition to distributing them for fundrais-

“Now more than ever, people believe that the ranking—or the presumed hierarchy of ‘quality’ or ‘prestige’—of the college or university one attends matters, and matters enormously. More than ever before, education is being viewed as a commodity. . . . The large and fundamental problem is that we are at risk of it all seeming and becoming increasingly a game. What matters is less the education and more the brand.”¹⁴

Lee Bollinger, president of Columbia University

ing and recruitment purposes, some college presidents send them to their colleagues at other campuses in the hope that the booklets will raise awareness of their college. And greater awareness may lead the reader to offer a more favorable rating when the *U.S. News* questionnaire arrives the following year.

Another tactic deals with how data are reported. Colleges have always had some leeway in how they report their statistics, and they sometimes choose to present themselves in the most favorable light

for the ratings. In the past, for example, some colleges chose to exclude the scores of recruited athletes in the SAT scores they reported for freshmen. Recruited athletes as a group usually have lower SAT scores than other new freshmen and would bring the average score, and hence the college’s ranking, down if they were included.

The Common Data Set

Efforts have recently been made to make the reporting of data more systematic. The Common Data Set initiative is a collaboration between colleges and publishers in which the colleges agree to provide basic statistical data each year, including detailed information about the composition of the freshman class along with admission and wait-list numbers. These data are then made available for use by the participating publishers, including *U.S. News*, as well as the general public if

the college chooses to post them. (You can usually find the report by checking the college's "institutional research office" Web page or by entering "Common Data Set" as a search term on the campus Web site.) This attempt at standardization has made it easier for different groups to access the same information. It has not, however, eliminated the flexibility that colleges have to report some numbers in a fashion they deem advantageous. As long as the public views rankings as an indicator of educational quality, it is not surprising that some colleges will respond to what the marketplace demands.

Admission Rate and Yield

Admission rate and yield are also under the control of colleges to a considerable extent. As we noted earlier in this chapter, *U.S. News* dropped yield from its ranking formula in 2003, acknowledging that it really wasn't very useful as a measure of college quality. But a college's yield—the percentage of students offered admission who actually accept—can indirectly affect its admissions rate. If a college has a high yield, it can admit fewer students and still fill its classes. If it has a low yield, it has to admit more. And regardless of how it is achieved, a lower admission rate translates into a higher *U.S. News* ranking for a college.

Increasing the size of the applicant pool is the most direct way to lower the percentage of those admitted. Aggressive outreach to students to encourage them to apply, although only a fraction of those applying will be admitted, is the easiest way for a college to become more selective. Although some colleges engage in outreach with an eye on improving ratings, others may have more noble goals—but the result is the same. Rachel Toor, a former admissions officer at Duke University, describes her own experience vividly as follows: "I travel around the country whipping kids (and their parents) into a frenzy so that they will apply. I tell them how great a school Duke is academically and how much fun they will have socially. Then, come April, we reject most of them."¹⁵

In addition, admission percentages can be kept low by limiting admission offers to those students who are most likely to enroll. Taken to an extreme, this means admitting as large a percentage of the incoming class by "early decision" as possible.

"A college that rises in the annual rankings often receives more applications the next year because of the increase, which, in turn, raises their ranking even more."

High school counselor reflecting on how rankings reinforce themselves

Early decision is an admissions option available at many colleges in which students submit a completed application by November 1 or November 15, rather than the traditional January 1, in exchange for an admission decision by mid-December

“ I overheard a conversation at a reception for the parents of newly admitted students at Elite U. A mom was chatting with a young admissions officer who was mingling with parents on the lawn of the president’s house. ‘I have a question I’d like to ask you,’ she said. ‘Since Elite U takes less than 15 percent of those who apply, why does the university work so hard to encourage more applications?’ The admissions officer was silent for a moment. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to ask the dean of admissions that question,’ she said. ”

Parent of prospective freshman

rather than early April. The catch is that early decision applications are binding on the student, meaning that the student is obligated to attend if admitted, subject to the availability of adequate financial aid. A student admitted by early decision is a sure thing for a college, since there is no guesswork about whether that student will attend. We’ll talk more about early decision and its cousin, early action, in Chapter Seven, but we mention it now because it is an important way that colleges can increase their yield and thereby reduce their admit rate. Some

elite colleges admit close to half of their incoming freshman class via early decision, leaving far fewer seats available for the much larger number of students applying in the regular time frame. For the class of 2007, for example, Wesleyan University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Princeton University each admitted 40 percent or more of their freshman classes early decision.

A college may also choose to increase its yield and lower its admit rate by rejecting, or more likely wait-listing, students they consider “overqualified” because the college believes the student won’t accept the offer of admission and will go elsewhere. The dean of admission at one such college defended the practice at his institution. “We know our place in the food chain of higher education,” he said. “We’re not a community college. And we’re not Harvard.”¹⁶ This practice is not common, but it is not rare, either.

Showing That You Are Interested

Some colleges try to identify who is seriously interested in them by tracking how much contact a student has had with the college—such as requesting an interview, chatting with a representative at a college fair, e-mailing a question to an admissions officer, visiting campus—and using that information when making the final

decision. A student who has initiated a good deal of contact with a college is seen as more likely to enroll than a student who has not, and hence is a better bet for admission. Given hard choices among candidates with similar credentials, “demonstrated interest” can make the difference between an offer of acceptance and placement on the wait-list at some colleges.

Emory University is an example of a college that tracks contact and lets students know that it is important. Their application form states, “We carefully note demonstrated interest during the admissions process and expect candidates to have done their homework on us. Have you met us at a college fair, ordered the Emory video visit, attended an information session, or perhaps visited campus?” Not all colleges, however, consider demonstrated interest in the admissions process. One campus that does not is Stanford University. “While we meet and build relationships with thousands of prospective students each year, we give no preference in the admissions process to such students,” said Robin Mamlet, former dean of Admissions and Financial Aid.¹⁷

“To think that when my older son applied we refrained from contacting colleges because we thought we were doing admissions offices a favor by not cluttering up their e-mail or phone lines. We won’t pester them, but we won’t have the same worry when our younger son applies.”

Parent of college sophomore with another child in the admissions pipeline

Even More Rankings

In all fairness, we should note that *U.S. News* is not the only publication that reports rankings of college quality—there are several others, just not as well known or influential. There are also lists of the top ten party schools, the most wired colleges, the “hottest” schools, and many others. Rankings, in fact, are taken so seriously by so many that even a ranking system devised solely to show how meaningless such rankings can be commanded a lot of attention.

“I don’t buy this whole college ranking thing. It’s kind of like ranking ice cream flavors. Everyone has their favorite, depending on what they like. You can’t tell me one is better than the other.”

Parent skeptical about the value of rankings

The editors of the venerable magazine known for its in-depth coverage of important social issues said they wanted to help calm the waters and bring rationality to the

In the fall of 2003, the *Atlantic Monthly* published its first annual college issue.

college admissions process for high-achieving students and their parents. As part of that effort, one of the articles made the case that a simple-minded ranking system based solely on selectivity measures would make about as much sense as the rankings in *U.S. News and World Report*.¹⁸ A full-page chart showing this “new” ranking approach accompanied the article. Despite the clearly worded text pointing out that the chart was close to meaningless as an indicator of college quality, lots of readers thought the chart was a serious attempt at producing yet another way to rank colleges.

Why Are Rankings So Popular?

It is not surprising that students and parents will turn to rankings like those in *U.S. News* when they are thinking about colleges. Deciding where to apply isn’t easy, and having someone else do the evaluating is an attractive alternative to figuring things out on your own, especially if you have no experience. As a society we tend to believe that everything can be rated in the quest for the best, and it is only natural to include colleges as well. We have become used to having ratings assess the value of things—from washing machines to restaurants to athletes to hospitals.

There is a major difference, though, when it comes to college rankings. The rankings simply don’t measure what they are supposed to assess—the educational experience for an individual student. Doing that requires a personalized look at a college through the eyes of the student who might potentially enroll. Although you no doubt have much in common with your friends and classmates, you also differ in important ways. There is simply no easy substitute for investing the time and effort to determine which colleges will be a good fit for you. Merely knowing which ones are the most selective or enjoy the highest reputations among college presidents (which, in large measure, is what the *U.S. News* rankings are telling you) doesn’t get you very far toward finding a good match for you, a place where you will be happy and learn what you want to know.

“I’ll Make More Money If I Graduate from an Elite College”: Another Myth

But let’s return now to the basic question of why there is so much interest in the group of about 100 colleges that are most selective. OK, you say, you now see that name recognition and rankings are not necessarily good indicators of educational quality. But maybe that is irrelevant. Isn’t the real value of an elite college education the contacts you make while there? Everyone knows that the rich, the famous, and the well-connected attend these colleges. Wouldn’t attending one of them increase your chances

of making the right contacts, getting into a prestigious graduate school, or getting an important career-enhancing break—all eventually leading to fortune if not fame?

Several studies have actually been interpreted as supporting this conclusion. Years after graduation, graduates of elite institutions have a higher income than that of graduates of less well-known colleges, just as the income of college graduates is higher than that of those with a high school education. The simple interpretation is that the experience of going to a selective college is responsible for the income difference. But researchers Stacy Dale and Alan Krueger considered another possibility.¹⁹ Perhaps, they hypothesized, the students who applied to and were accepted by elite colleges had personal qualities to begin with that were in some way responsible for the differences in income later in life. Maybe the kind of college where students received their undergraduate education wasn't an important factor at all.

To test their hypothesis, Dale and Krueger compared income figures for individuals who were accepted by elite colleges and actually attended those colleges with the income of people who were accepted by elite colleges but who chose to attend a less selective college.

The results showed no difference in income between the two groups! (The only exception was low-income students for whom attending an elite college *was* related to higher income later in life.) The data even suggested that simply having applied to an elite college, regardless of whether a student was accepted, was the critical factor in predicting later income. Students who had the self-confidence and motivation to envision themselves competitive at an elite college showed the enhanced economic benefit normally associated with having actually attended such a college.

*“Students may have a better sense of their potential ability than college admissions committees. To cite one prominent example, Steven Spielberg was rejected by the University of Southern California and UCLA film schools.”*²⁰

*Stacey Dale and Alan Krueger,
researchers who studied
the long-term effects of attending
different types of colleges*

Getting into Graduate School

What about admission to graduate school? Does attending a selective college affect your chances of getting into a highly regarded law, business, or medical school or other graduate program? Anecdotal evidence and a small amount of published data would indicate yes, a disproportional number of graduates of selective

colleges attend prestigious graduate and professional schools. But here, too, it may be that students admitted to selective colleges bring qualities with them that are responsible for their subsequent success in gaining admission to these schools after graduation. Perhaps those same students would have done just as well if they had gone to a less selective college.

Unfortunately, Dale and Krueger did not have enough data in their study to rigorously test this hypothesis—they were able to draw firm conclusions only about

“We didn’t find any evidence that suggested that the selectivity of a student’s undergraduate college was related to the quality of the graduate school they attended.”²¹

Stacy Dale, coauthor of Dale and Krueger study

income. They did, however, have sufficient data to show that people who went to a selective college were no more likely to obtain an advanced degree than those who were admitted to a selective college but chose to attend a less selective school. In addition, preliminary analysis of their admittedly limited data supported the in-

terpretation that it was the qualities of the students themselves, and not anything associated with the college they attended, that were related to *where* they went for graduate study. Students admitted to a selective college but who chose to attend a less selective one seemed to fare just as well when it came to graduate or professional school admission as those who actually attended the more selective college.

Looking Ahead

We believe that the college selection process should be about fit—finding colleges that are a good fit for you. A number of factors contribute to fit—academic, extracurricular, social, and geographic, among others—and the determination of fit will be different for different people. Assessing fit takes time and effort and is much harder to do than simply choosing colleges by looking at a list of rankings. Stephen

Lewis, former president of Carleton College, stated it well: “The question should not be, what are the best colleges? The real question should be, best for whom?”²³

“Do not choose a college by the numbers. Most of those numbers are about resources and reputation and not actual quality or performance. Base your choice on your own needs and aspirations and which colleges can best meet them. As Albert Einstein reminded us, ‘Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.’”²²

*David Davenport, former president
of Pepperdine University*