



Why Has College Admissions Become So Competitive?

Applying to college was a simple process for 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 close by; many considered a college three hundred miles from home 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 first part of the twenty-first century. Media headlines tell a story very different for students applying to college now. “Colleges send record number of rejections; competition for admission soaring,”¹ “Student agony grows along with top colleges’ wait lists,”² “Toward college without a map; lack of counselors leaves students adrift,”³ “College admissions dance gets longer, more

complicated,”⁴ “High anxiety of getting into college,”⁵ and “Families seek counseling for college stress.”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. By the spring of 2008, the admissions rate had fallen to 7.1 percent out of an applicant pool of over 27,000 for the class of 2012. On the other coast, UCLA, a public university, reported that it had extended offers of admission to just under 23 percent of the 55,000 students who applied for freshman admission to the class of 2012, the lowest admission rate in its history. The same year, UCLA’s northern California neighbor, Stanford University, also reported an admission rate lower than ever before—9.5 percent, down from 12 percent five years earlier. 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 a decade earlier. What has happened to change the college admissions picture so dramatically?

The Echo Boom

The simple explanation for why it is harder to get into four-year colleges now than ever before seems to be supply and demand: more high school graduates than

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

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
ADMISSIONS OFFICER

ever are 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 1997 there were 2.6 million graduates; in 2003, there were 3 million; by 2009, the number of high school graduates had

grown to 3.3 million. Although the numbers will decline slightly from the 2009 peak, they are projected to stay at or above 3.2 million at least until 2022.⁷

Part of the increase is the result of immigration, especially from Asia and Latin America, but most of the growth is due 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 are part of the largest group of high school graduates ever.

Social Changes

But the problem is not just demographics. Application numbers have grown much faster than the age cohort. Important social changes have taken place as well. Not only are more students graduating from high school each year, proportionally more of them want to go to college. A college education is increasingly seen as key to economic success in our society, just as a high school diploma was once the minimum requirement. Studies confirm the value of a college diploma in terms of lifelong 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 used to be low.

At the same time, 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. Through colorful “view-books” mailed directly to students, visits to high schools by admissions officers, college nights at local hotels, and information booths at college fairs, colleges reach out to prospective freshmen with unprecedented energy and at great expense.

Started in earnest in the 1980s when the number of college-age students dropped temporarily, these marketing efforts have continued and expanded even as the number of students applying has soared. Sophisticated marketing techniques are used not only by colleges that anticipate problems filling their freshman class but also by colleges with an overabundance of qualified applicants. Colleges want to attract academically qualified, talented, and diverse groups of applicants from which to select their freshman class, and they often go to great lengths to do it. And it works! 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 parts of the country far from their homes.

The Role of the Internet

The Internet also now plays a major role in how students approach college admissions. Although printed material and in-person presentations are still important ways for students to learn about different colleges, the Web is the top source of information for students who have grown up online. Students can visit campuses through sophisticated online tours and webcams and can get many of their

questions answered by “frequently asked question” (FAQ) lists posted on the Web, or by tracking college-sponsored blogs. Colleges have invested heavily in technology to help showcase themselves.

Finally, the Internet has made it easier than ever to apply to college. Students no longer have to send for application forms, wait for them to arrive in the mail, and then fill them out by hand. Forms can be downloaded from almost all college sites or, better yet, completed and submitted directly online, saving some of the time and effort, and even postage, that a traditional paper application requires.

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 OF STUDENTS
APPLYING TO MORE AND MORE SCHOOLS

Some schools—St. Olaf College and Lewis and Clark College are examples—even waive their application fee (most fees are in the \$45–\$75 range) for those who submit their forms over the Internet. Simplifying things even more, more than 350 colleges now accept the 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 participating colleges as a student wishes. With admission harder to predict, students are now submitting more applica-

tions than ever. Sending eight to ten applications is now the norm at many private schools and high-performing public high schools—twelve to fifteen or more applications are not uncommon. The Common Application system, coupled with technology in general, has made it easier for students to apply to an ever-larger number of colleges.

All 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 is 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 of their applicants. In fact, each

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

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 one hundred 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. As the number of applications to a college increases, the admission rate decreases. Another key factor affecting selectivity at a given college is the academic strength of the applicant pool, since applicants tend to self-select when applying to certain colleges, especially some smaller ones, known for their academic rigor. Such schools may accept a higher percentage of those who apply because their applicant pools tend to be smaller and more uniformly strong. Both factors—admission rate and strength of the applicant pool—help determine the difficulty of gaining admission to a particular school.

To simplify the discussion here, however, we define selectivity only in terms of admission rate, and define a *selective college* as one that has an admission rate of 50 percent or less. We further divide selective colleges 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, of course, and they don’t take into account the self-selection factor, but they give a sense of the relative difficulty of gaining admission. Even though more than two thousand 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 the hundred colleges that fall into one of the three groups defined as selective.

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 or those seeking admission to the many colleges that accept most or all of their applicants. Nevertheless, it is very real to those who are applying to 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 build a college list that is right for you and to help you submit strong applications. If you'll be applying to less selective schools, please keep reading as well. Most of what we have to share in this book will help you too. All students face the challenges of identifying colleges that will be a good fit and then submitting well-crafted applications.

WHY SO MUCH INTEREST IN SUCH A SMALL GROUP OF COLLEGES?

What is behind such intense interest in this small group of colleges and universities? Why, in particular, does such a mystique surround 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. Parents are often the primary drivers of the push toward prestige, but students also report similar pressures from peers in high school. Just in the last generation, going to a highly ranked college has become a status symbol of greater value than almost any other consumer good, in part because it cannot simply be purchased if you have enough money.

Although some people openly acknowledge considering prestige in college choice, many more will cite the assumed quality of the educational experience as the basis for their interest in an elite college. But this rationale often depends on the unstated, and often untested, assumption that a good indicator of the quality of something is how much others seek it. This means that selective colleges are



Colleges by Admission Rate for the Class of 2011

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

Amherst College
Bowdoin College
Brown University
Cal Tech
Claremont McKenna
College
Columbia University
Dartmouth College
Harvard University
MIT
University of Pennsylvania
Pomona College
Princeton University
Stanford University
Swarthmore College
Williams College
Yale University

Highly Selective (less than 35 percent of applicants admitted)

Bard College
Barnard College
UC Berkeley
Boston College
Brandeis University
Bucknell University
Carleton College
Carnegie Mellon University
University of Chicago
Colby College
Colgate University
Colorado College
Connecticut College
Cornell University
Davidson College
Duke University
Emory University

Georgetown University
Hamilton College
Harvey Mudd College
Haverford College
College of the Holy Cross
Johns Hopkins University
Kenyon College
Lafayette College
Lehigh University
UCLA
Middlebury College
University of North Carolina
Northwestern University
University of Notre Dame
Oberlin College
Pepperdine University
Pitzer College
Reed College
Rice University
University of Southern
California
Spelman College
Trinity College
(Connecticut)
Tufts University
Vanderbilt University
Vassar College
Washington and Jefferson
College
Washington and Lee
University
Wesleyan University
College of William and Mary

Very Selective (less than 50 percent of applicants admitted)

Agnes Scott College
Baylor University
Berea College
Binghamton University

Bryn Mawr College
University of Connecticut
Cornell College (Iowa)
University of Delaware
Denison University
Dickinson College
University of Florida
Fordham University
Franklin and Marshall
College
George Washington
University
Gettysburg College
Grinnell College
Macalester College
University of Maryland
University of Miami
University of Missouri
Northeastern University
Occidental College
Rensselaer Polytechnic
Institute
University of Richmond
University of Rochester
Rutgers University
UC San Diego
Sarah Lawrence College
Scripps College
Skidmore College
St. Lawrence University
Stony Brook University
Texas Christian University
Tulane University
Union College
University of Virginia
Wabash College
Wake Forest University
Wellesley College
Wheaton College
(Massachusetts)
Whitman College

presumed to offer a better education; the more selective, the higher the quality. But is this really true?

Take the eight colleges of the Ivy League, for example—Harvard University, Yale University, Princeton University, Brown University, Dartmouth College, the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell University, and Columbia University. One counselor we know, whose children attended two of these institutions, refers to the group as the “Climbing Vine Schools” to take away a little of the allure of the name. The Ivy League originally referred only to a football league. (Only seven colleges belonged at first. Brown University eventually joined 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. The admission rate of each Ivy places it in the super-selective or highly selective

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 as 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

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

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

category, and each has renowned faculty as well as fine students. Everyone agrees that they are excellent schools, but do the Ivies automatically offer undergraduates an educational experience better than that at many other institutions? The answer, well known in academic circles but surprising to many others, is assuredly no.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FIT

This book doesn't try to dissuade you if prestige is important to you in selecting a college—you have lots of company. What it does do, however, is discuss many other important dimensions to consider in selecting colleges. We think that the college admissions process should be about fit—the fit between a student and a college. Finding a good fit does not mean that there is just one perfect school for a student—it means exploring an array of factors that can enhance a student's academic and personal success. Many factors besides prestige go into determining fit—we discuss 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 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—we simply want to help you understand as much as possible about yourself, the college admissions process, and colleges themselves, so that you can make the best choices for you.

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.⁹

GERHARD CASPER, FORMER PRESIDENT
OF STANFORD UNIVERSITY

THE RANKINGS GAME

A major contributor to the mystique of selective colleges has been the annual rankings of colleges published by *U.S. News & World Report*. The magazine's first rankings, published in 1983, were based solely on surveys of college administrators. Over time, the rankings became so popular that they outgrew the magazine itself. Each August *U.S. News & World Report* publishes a separate guidebook, "America's Best Colleges," that features college rankings based on a mix



Not Totally Cured, But Still Trying

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 small local newspaper 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, and I couldn't wait.

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

I followed her advice 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.

When my children applied to college, my internal struggle bubbled up again. I fought it. I worked hard not to 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. I really meant it. I gave (and still give) the same advice to friends and family.

Now that my children have graduated, I notice that somewhere along the way I developed a "show off meter," an internal monitor that tells me when I go too far.

An acquaintance will ask, "How are the kids?" and if I finish my answer feeling a little warm, as if I just walked into a stuffy room, I know I've said something that crossed the line. I'm proud of my children, no question, but who they are as people is far more important than where they have gone to school or what they have done. I am grateful to that wise counselor for helping me see what was so clearly before my eyes.

M. F.



of reputation and statistical data about the colleges, as well as information and advice about applying to college. The yearly rankings, though, are what drive the sales of “America’s Best Colleges” and generate great attention among readers and great controversy among those, including us, who believe the ranking process is fundamentally flawed. One critic, Lloyd Thacker, a prominent voice for reform of the college admissions process, refers to the ranking business as the “ranksters.”

While president of Stanford University, Gerhard Casper expressed his concern about the rankings to the editor of *U.S. News & 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.”¹⁰

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 an option to respond “don’t know.” Many of those who receive the questionnaire acknowledge that they lack the detailed knowledge of other colleges that they would need to respond meaningfully. A number of college presidents, mostly in a set of liberal arts colleges known as the Annapolis Group, have signed a statement refusing to participate in the survey either by rating other colleges or, in some cases, by refusing to submit their data in the format the magazine desires.

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 & World Report*. While we continue to be suspicious of the rankings, this is still a very promising position for the College.¹¹

LETTER POSTED BY COLLEGE PRESIDENT
ON CAMPUS WEB SITE FOLLOWING
RELEASE OF THE *U.S. NEWS* RANKINGS

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 derived student selectivity from several kinds of data for the freshman class—admission rate, the 25th and 75th percentile of SAT or ACT scores, and the percentage of students in the top 10 percent of their high school class.

The *U.S. News* Formula

All the measures we have just described are collected annually for each college and put into a formula that weights the different kinds of data and then computes an overall “ranking.” To avoid comparing apples with oranges, *U.S. News* ranks campuses with those with the same mission, so that research universities and liberal arts colleges, for example, are ranked separately. (We discuss the differences between these two kinds of institutions in Chapter Four, among the factors to consider in choosing colleges.) Only the first hundred colleges in each group are ranked individually; after that, the schools are grouped alphabetically by “tiers.” Each year the magazine slightly modifies its formula, ostensibly to improve its utility for assessing educational quality but also to sell the rankings as “new and improved.”

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.¹³

LEE BOLLINGER, PRESIDENT
OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

As a consequence of these changes, a college’s ranking can shift fairly dramatically from one year to the next simply as a result of changes in the formula used to compute the ratings. The school itself may not have changed at all. Does its quality relative to its peers really change significantly in one year? Of course not. Critics of the rankings argue that meaningful changes in college quality cannot be measured in the short term, and that *U.S. News* changes the formula primarily to sustain interest in the rankings 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, such as good teaching or student satisfaction. Educators readily acknowledge that educational quality and student satisfaction 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* now reports some NSSE data in its "America's Best Colleges" issue, although they are not counted in the calculation of the rankings. Unfortunately, many highly regarded colleges do not 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 data are not used or reported as broadly as they might be, we think you should know about them, since they suggest important ways to assess educational quality. You can learn more about NSSE and see which colleges participate in it at www.nsse.iub.edu. We applaud the questions that NSSE asks, and recommend that you ask them on your own when you research and visit colleges. (We talk more about college visits in Chapter Five.)

Critics have pointed out that while the *U.S. News* variables can contribute indirectly to educational quality (perhaps higher salaries lead to better faculty and smaller classes mean more personal attention), educators do not agree on how those variables can be used to measure the quality of a college. To make things worse, some of the factors in the *U.S. News* formula can be manipulated. As much as colleges disparage the ranking process, 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 pay close attention to the rankings and expect to see "improvement." Under pressure, some colleges have actively worked to do better in ways that have little to do with educational quality and much to do with enhancing the school's ranking.



Representative Questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement 2008

1. To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas (rated from “very much” to “very little” along a four-point scale):
 - 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)

USED WITH PERMISSION FROM INDIANA UNIVERSITY

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 to support fundraising and recruitment, some college presidents send them to their colleagues at other campuses in the hope that the booklets will raise awareness of their college. That greater awareness may lead the reader to offer a more favorable rating when the *U.S. News* questionnaire arrives the following year. It’s impossible to know if this actually works, but the colleges think it does.

Another tactic involves the reporting of data. Colleges have always had some leeway in how they report their statistics, and they sometimes present themselves in the most favorable light for the ratings. In the past, for example, some colleges excluded 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 freshmen and would lower the average score, and hence the college's ranking, if they were included. *U.S. News* says they have stopped this practice, but it is hard to know for sure.

The Common Data Set

The reporting of data has recently become more systematic through the development of the Common Data Set. In this collaborative project among colleges and a number of publishers, the colleges agree to provide standardized statistical data each year, including detailed information about the composition of the freshman class along with admission and wait-list numbers. The participating publishers, including *U.S. News*, then make the data public in various forms, and some of the colleges choose to post the report itself. (You can usually find the report, if available, 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 assumes that rankings measure educational quality, some colleges will feel pressured to provide what they think the market wants.

Admission Rate and Yield

Although it plays only a small role in the *U.S. News* formula, a college's admission rate or selectivity is the one figure that captures the public's attention and the most headlines. A decline from the preceding year in the percentage of students who are accepted is often interpreted as reflecting increased interest in the college, and hence its inherent desirability. Aggressive outreach to students to encourage them to apply, despite knowing that only a fraction of those applying will be admitted, is the easiest way for a college to become more selective. While most colleges engage in outreach with more noble goals, the result is the same. Rachel Toor, a former Duke admissions officer, vividly describes her own experience: "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.”¹⁴

Colleges can also lower their final admission rate by limiting offers to those students who are most likely to enroll. A college’s *yield*—the percentage of students offered admission who actually decide to enroll—can affect its admission rate. A college with a high yield can admit fewer students and still fill its classes. If it has a low yield, it has to admit more. Taken to an extreme, this means admitting as large a percentage of the incoming class by “early decision” as possible. 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 a decision by mid-December rather than in the spring. 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 its staff know that the student will attend.

We talk more about early decision and its cousin, early action, in Chapter Seven, but we mention it now because it allows colleges to increase their yield and thereby reduce their admission rate. Some colleges currently admit from a third to half of their incoming freshman class via early decision, leaving fewer seats available for the much larger number of students applying in the regular admissions round. For the class of 2012, for example, Wesleyan University admitted 38 percent of its freshman class

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

via early decision, while the University of Pennsylvania admitted 47 percent via its early decision program. Some colleges are reducing these percentages, however, for reasons that we explain in Chapter Seven.

A college can also increase its yield and lower its admission rate by rejecting, or more likely wait-listing, students considered “overqualified” because the college believes they won’t accept the offer of admission and will go elsewhere. The dean of admissions 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.”¹⁵ 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 whose first contact with the college is the arrival of the application over the Internet, 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 openly lets students know that level of contact matters. Its 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? . . . We are honest in the fact that demonstrated interest can be a tip factor when we make admission decisions.” Not all colleges are this refreshingly candid, however, and not all consider demonstrated interest in the admissions process. In general, this counts less at the super-selective colleges that already have the highest yields. They have little to gain by showing preference to those who try to demonstrate interest.

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 A COLLEGE SOPHOMORE
AND ANOTHER CHILD IN THE
ADMISSIONS PIPELINE

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 supposed experts do the evaluating is an attractive alternative

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.¹⁶

STACEY DALE AND ALAN KRUEGER,
RESEARCHERS WHO STUDIED THE
LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF ATTENDING
DIFFERENT TYPES OF COLLEGES

to figuring things out on your own, especially if you have no experience. As a society, we are obsessed with rating consumer goods in the quest for the best. We accept ratings that assess washing machines, restaurants, football teams, hospitals, and movies, so why not include colleges as well?

College rankings, though, are very different. 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.

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

But let's return now to the basic question of why there is so much interest in the group of the most selective hundred or so colleges. OK, you say, you now see that name recognition and rankings do not necessarily indicate 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.¹⁷ Perhaps, they hypothesized, the students who applied to and were accepted by elite colleges had personal qualities to begin with that led in some way to the income differences later in life. Maybe the kind of college which students attended wasn't as important as who they were as people.

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 less selective ones. The results showed no difference in income between the two groups! (The only exception was that low-income students who attended an elite college had higher incomes 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 with the self-confidence and motivation to envision themselves competitive at a selective college showed the enhanced economic benefit normally associated with having actually attended such a college.

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.¹⁸

STACY DALE

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."¹⁹

DAVID DAVENPORT, FORMER PRESIDENT
OF PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

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 indicate that, 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 could draw firm conclusions only about 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 interpretation that it was the qualities of the students themselves, and not anything associated with the college they attended, that were correlated with their graduate schools. Students who were admitted to a selective college but 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. But higher education is not like a shoe, something that you slip on once and decide if it fits well. 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?”²⁰