

EDUCATION LIFE

What Colleges Want in an Applicant (Everything)

The admissions process is a maddening mishmash of competing objectives, and an attempt to measure the unmeasurable: you. No, it isn't fair, and likely never will be.

By ERIC HOOVER NOV. 1, 2017

The admissions process is out of whack. Just ask the heartbroken applicant, rejected by her dream school. Ask high school counselors, who complain that colleges don't reward promising students for their creativity, determination or service to others. Even the gatekeepers at some famous institutions acknowledge, quietly, that the selection system is broken.

Ask five people how to fix it, though, and they'll give five different answers. Sure, you might think colleges put too much stock in the SAT, but your neighbor's kid with the near-perfect score thinks it should matter a lot. More than half of Americans say colleges shouldn't give children of alumni a leg up, according to a recent Gallup poll; yet nearly half say parental connections should be at least a "minor factor."

The debate about who gets into the nation's competitive colleges, and why, keeps boiling over. The Justice Department has confirmed that it's looking into a complaint, filed in 2015 by a coalition of 64 Asian-American associations, charging discrimination against high-achieving Asian-American college applicants. Also, students for Fair Admissions, which opposes affirmative action policies, has filed

discrimination lawsuits against Harvard, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Texas at Austin.

Although the Supreme Court affirmed last year that admissions officers may consider an applicant's race among other factors, polls show that a majority of Americans disagree with that decision. Critics of affirmative action see plenty of room for future legal challenges.

Whatever happens, age-old questions about fairness in admissions will surely endure. For one thing, the nation can't come to terms with a tricky five-letter word: merit. Michael Young, a British sociologist, coined the pejorative term "meritocracy" over a half-century ago to describe a future in which standardized intelligence tests would crown a new elite. Yet as Rebecca Zwick explains in her new book "Who Gets In?" the meaning has shifted. The word "merit," she writes, has come to mean "academic excellence, narrowly defined" as grades and test scores.

But that's just one way to think of an applicant's worthiness. Dr. Zwick, professor emeritus at the University of California at Santa Barbara, has long been a researcher at the Educational Testing Service, which develops and administers the SAT. She disputes the notion that testing prowess — or any other attribute, for that matter — entitles a student to a spot at his chosen college. "There is, in fact, no absolute definition of merit," she writes.

That brings us to you, the anxious applicant, the frazzled parent, the confused citizen, all wondering what colleges want. It's worth taking a deep breath and noting that only 13 percent of four-year colleges accept fewer than half of their applicants. That said, colleges where seats are scarce stir up the nation's emotions. Each year, the world-famous institutions reject thousands and thousands of students who could thrive there.

Yes, rejection stings. But say these words aloud: The admissions process isn't fair. Like it or not, colleges aren't looking to reel in the greatest number of straight-A students who've taken seven or more Advanced Placement courses. A rejection isn't really about you; it's about a maddening mishmash of competing objectives.

Just as parents give teenagers a set of chores, colleges hand their admissions leaders a list of things to accomplish. When they fail, they often get fired.

“We don’t live in a cloud — the reality is, there’s a bottom line,” said Angel B. Pérez, vice president for enrollment and student success at Trinity College, in Hartford. “We’re an institution, but we’re also a business.”

On many campuses, financial concerns affect decisions about whom to admit. A recent report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling found that about half of institutions said an applicant’s “ability to pay” was of at least “some importance” in admissions decisions. Among other targets is geographic diversity, which is now seen as an indicator of institutional strength and popularity. (Some presidents have been known to gripe if the freshman class doesn’t represent all 50 states.) A campus might also need a particular number of engineering majors or goalies.

Indeed, a college could accept 33 percent of all applicants, but that doesn’t mean each applicant has a one-in-three chance. Success depends on what a student brings to the table.

Generally, nothing carries more weight in admissions than grades (plus strength of the high school curriculum) and ACT/SAT scores. With limited time and resources, those metrics offer a relatively quick way to predict who will succeed. But the measures have drawbacks. Grade inflation has complicated the task of evaluating achievements, and so has the variance in high school grading policies. Standardized test scores correlate with family income; white and Asian-American students fare better than black and Hispanic students do. Also, when colleges talk about predicting “success,” they usually mean first-year grades — a limited definition.

And so, many colleges rely on “holistic” evaluations, allowing colleges to contextualize applicants’ academic records and to identify disadvantaged students who might lack the sparkling credentials of their affluent peers. Did they attend low-performing high schools or well-resourced ones? Did they participate in extracurricular activities? Do they have leadership experience?

What colleges look for sends a powerful message about what matters, not just to admissions officers but in life, and students often respond accordingly.

Dr. Pérez, a first-generation college student who grew up in a low-income family, recently revamped Trinity's process to better identify promising students, particularly the disadvantaged. While reading applications, its admissions officers now look for evidence of 13 characteristics — including curiosity, empathy, openness to change and ability to overcome adversity — that researchers associate with successful students. These are also qualities that the liberal-arts college values, inside and outside the classroom.

Trinity's officers can check as many qualities as apply using a drop-down box labeled "Predictors of Success." They must note where they saw evidence of each quality in the application. "It can't be just a hint," Dr. Pérez said. He recalls a teacher recommendation describing how an applicant had taken a stand on a controversial social issue in class, even though other students vocally disagreed with him. Impressed, Dr. Pérez checked the box for "Comfort in Minority of 1," a sign, perhaps, that the student would contribute to campus dialogues. Also on the drop-down: "Delayed Gratification" and "Risk Taking."

While Trinity still values conventional measures, the new model has expanded the staff's understanding of merit. "We're trying to give students more credit for these characteristics, especially those who've had some challenges," Dr. Pérez said. The new approach, along with the college's recent decision to stop requiring ACT/SAT scores, has helped it diversify its classes. Low-income and first-generation students represent 15 percent of this fall's freshman class, up from 8 percent three years ago.

"I'm trying to increase the tools we have, and get beyond a system that is absolutely antiquated," Dr. Pérez said. "As the country becomes more diverse, as we learn more about the correlation between standardized test scores and wealth, we have to be a lot more creative in predicting for success in college."

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What most colleges ask for from applicants doesn't reveal much about the many skills and talents a student might possess. But what if colleges asked for more?

The admissions process at Olin College of Engineering includes a live audition. After completing a traditional application, selected students visit the campus, in Needham, Mass., for an intense two-day tryout. In addition to sitting for interviews, they work in small groups to complete a tabletop design challenge, such as building a tower that can hold a specific weight. On the second day, they are given another task, like designing a campus building. This time, evaluators observe each student, noting how well they communicate with others and adapt on the fly.

The experience is meant to help prospective students understand Olin's collaborative culture, while giving the college a better glimpse of each applicant before finalizing acceptance. "It's hard to nail down a student's mind-set from the traditional elements of the application," said Emily Roper-Doten, the dean of admission and financial aid. "This allows us to see them in motion, in an educational moment."

A desire to see what students can do with their hands inspired a recent change at one of the world's most renowned campuses. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (motto: "Mens et manus," Latin for "Mind and hand") now gives applicants the option of submitting a Maker Portfolio to show their "technical creativity."

Applicants can send images, a short video and a PDF that shed light on a project they've undertaken — clothing they've made, apps they've designed, cakes they've baked, furniture they've built, chain mail they've woven. M.I.T. also asks students to explain what the project meant to them, as well as how much help they got. A panel of faculty members and alumni reviews the portfolios.

Last year, about 5 percent of applicants submitted a Makers Portfolio. "It gives us a fuller picture of the student," said Stuart Schmill, dean of admissions and student financial services. "Without this, some applicants might not be able to fully get across how good a fit they are for us."

M.I.T.'s experiment has sparked discussions among admissions deans, some of whom say they plan to offer similar opportunities for applicants to send evidence of project-based learning. They describe the Makers Portfolio as an intriguing glimpse of how a college might better align its process with its culture and values. The catch: Reviewing all those portfolios takes time, something admissions offices lack. Even a small college like Olin, which welcomed fewer than 100 new students this fall, must scramble to pull off its elaborate evaluations. Larger campuses couldn't even consider such an approach.

Thorough review has become more challenging over the last decade, with waves of applicants overwhelming big-name colleges, victims of their own popularity. The University of California at Los Angeles received more than 100,000 applications for about 6,000 spots this fall. Stanford got 44,000 for just over 1,700 spots, and M.I.T. juggled more than 20,000 for 1,450 seats.

Most colleges are considering more incremental ways to enhance evaluations. The Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success, with more than 130 prominent campuses as members, recently established an application platform with a feature called a virtual college locker, a private space where students can upload materials, such as videos and written work, that they could later add to their applications. Among its stated goals: to make admissions more personal.

So far, most of its members aren't asking applicants to send anything different than before. But that could change. A handful of colleges are planning experiments using alternative ways to measure student potential. One hopes to enable applicants to demonstrate their "emotional intelligence," or E.Q., to showcase their ability to work with others, according to Annie Reznik, the coalition's executive director. Another seeks a way for prospective students to display their "fire" for learning.

"We want better inputs," said Jeremiah Quinlan, dean of undergraduate admissions and financial aid at Yale. "The inputs we have predict success academically. Now, we have the ability to get to know a student better, from a different type of submission."

Like many deans, Mr. Quinlan has grown wary of polished personal essays in which applicants describe their achievements. "They feel like they have to show off,

because we're so selective," he said, "and it's completely understandable." Technology, he believes, can help colleges get to know the student beneath the surface of a résumé, to gain a better sense of their passions, the kind of community member the applicant might be.

Last year, Yale allowed students using the coalition's application to submit a document, image, audio file or video in response to a prompt (they also had to reflect, in 250 words or less, on their submission). When Justin Aubin heard about that option last fall, he thought, "Cool!"

Mr. Aubin, from Oak Lawn, Ill., was then a high school senior hoping to attend Yale. The following prompt caught his eye: "A community to which you belong and the footprint you have left." He submitted a short video documenting his Eagle Scout project, for which he oversaw the construction of a monument honoring veterans. Even a well-written essay, he figured, couldn't capture his experience as well as four minutes of footage, shot by his older brother.

The content of the video impressed Yale's admissions committee. "People sat up in their chairs," Mr. Quinlan said. "You could see how he handled his leadership role, and we felt like we got a good sense of him in a way that we didn't get from recommendations."

Mr. Aubin is now a freshman at Yale.

Did the video tip the scales? "That was a difference-maker," Mr. Quinlan said.

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Even as colleges consider innovation, it's worth asking which fixtures of the admissions process, if any, they are willing to discard. Some prevalent practices seem to stand in the way of meaningful change.

Giving an advantage to the sons and daughters of alumni is one such practice. Some colleges admit legacies (and the children of potential donors) at a much greater rate than non-legacies. Legacies make up nearly a third of Harvard's current freshman class, The Harvard Crimson has reported. Princeton's class of 2021 is 13 percent legacy, according to the university's website.

While a handful of prominent institutions, including the University of Georgia and Texas A&M University, stopped considering legacy status more than a decade ago, most colleges seem unlikely to remove that variable from the admissions equation anytime soon. “I don’t think an applicant’s legacy status is a crazy thing to look at, especially in the financial climate some colleges are in,” said Rick Clark, director of undergraduate admission at Georgia Tech, where nearly a fifth of freshmen are legacies. “Colleges have to think about their longevity.”

The benefits of legacies go beyond maintaining good will with alumni who might open their wallets, Mr. Clark said. In his experience, they tend to be enthusiastic students who help foster community on campus, the kind of relationships that help other students feel at home and succeed. “Multigenerational ties to a place add value, creating this passionate, magnetic source of energy,” he said.

The key, Mr. Clark believes, is not to lower standards, or to enroll so many legacies that other priorities, such as increasing racial and socioeconomic diversity, suffer as a result. “Those two goals aren’t mutually exclusive,” he said.

Other measurements used by selective colleges have nothing to do with a student’s accomplishments or attributes — and everything to do with a college’s agenda.

About one in five institutions allot “considerable importance” to “demonstrated interest,” the degree to which applicants convey their desire to enroll if accepted, according to a survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The strongest expression of demonstrated interest is applying for binding early decision, a policy that favors affluent students who don’t need to compare financial aid offers and one that some colleges use to fill half their seats.

Beyond that, technology has made it easier to track the number of times an applicant engages with a college (by visiting the campus, contacting an admissions officer, responding to an email). This valuable information helps officers gauge who’s most likely to enroll, which can influence who gets admitted in the first place. A higher “yield,” the percentage of accepted students who actually enroll, is widely seen as a measure of status.

The problem is that savvy students who know colleges are watching them can tilt the odds in their favor, said Nancy Leopold, executive director of CollegeTracks, a Maryland nonprofit group that helps low-income and first-generation students get into college: “Demonstrated interest is biased against kids who don’t know the game exists, or who don’t have the time or money to play it.”

What do colleges really cherish? The answer is influenced greatly by the entities they seek to impress. U.S. News & World Report and other college guides, not to mention bond-rating agencies, rely heavily on conventional admissions metrics like ACT/SAT scores and acceptance rates to evaluate institutions. A college president might wish to attract more creative thinkers, but accomplishing that goal won’t help his college’s ranking.

Generally, colleges are risk-averse. Rocking the boat with a newfangled admissions process could hurt their reputations. “The challenge for many admissions offices is to make a change, but not so much change or innovation that you’re risking the position you’re in,” said Ms. Roper-Doten of Olin. Asking students to do more could scare off would-be applicants.

“Colleges seek validation,” said Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy, a nonprofit group that has sought to reform college admissions. “Without a real external incentive for colleges to care about broadening their understanding of what makes an applicant promising, they don’t seem likely to change the definition on their own.”

A recent campaign called “Turning the Tide,” a project of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, is urging admissions deans to rethink the qualities they consider in applicants. In a report signed by representatives of about 200 campuses, colleges are asked to promote ethical character and service to others through the admissions process.

Although some deans say they have no business assessing the character of still-maturing teenagers, the push has prompted a handful of institutions to tweak their applications. The University of North Carolina now emphasizes contributions to others when asking about extracurricular activities. M.I.T. added an essay question asking students to describe how they’ve helped people.

Richard Weissbourd, a senior lecturer at Harvard, who leads the initiative, recommends that colleges define service in ways that might resonate with disadvantaged students. “Many students don’t have opportunities to do community service,” he said. “They’re taking care of their siblings, or they’re working part-time jobs to help their families. Colleges need to say, ‘That matters to us.’”

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In the end, increasing racial and socioeconomic diversity in higher education is a matter of will. A college can prioritize it or not, said Shaun R. Harper, a professor at the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education who studies race and student success.

In September, Dr. Harper gave a keynote speech at the annual conference of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, in Boston. He urged his audience to think hard about racial inequality and “things you perhaps inadvertently and unknowingly do to support it.”

He cited as examples high school counselors who discourage promising minority students from applying to highly selective colleges; college leaders who say they “just can’t find enough” qualified black applicants even as their athletics coaches comb the nation for black students who excel at sports; admissions officers who recruit at the same high schools year after year, overlooking those full of underrepresented minorities.

As Dr. Harper spoke, many listeners applauded; a few scowled. He concluded his remarks by criticizing the lack of racial diversity among admissions deans themselves. He received a standing ovation.

In a subsequent interview, Dr. Harper elaborated on his concerns. “When the demographics of the profession have not changed, particularly at the senior level,” he said, “I don’t know that we can expect a major change, especially in terms of diversifying the class.”

Although Dr. Harper believes colleges rely too heavily on ACT/SAT scores, he says that the major barriers arise well before the application process even begins.

Colleges, he said, must do more in terms of outreach to encourage underrepresented students to apply.

Dr. Pérez, at Trinity, has similar concerns. Although he is convinced that the selection process can be successfully revamped, he doesn't think that will solve the No. 1 problem he sees in admissions. "The problem is money," he said. "If I had more funding, my class would be more diverse. The conversation we're not having in this country is: How do we fund colleges and universities?"

However the admissions process might evolve, it surely will continue to serve the interests of colleges first and foremost. Even if someone invents a better, more equitable way to gauge applicants' potential, a college's many wants and needs wouldn't change. Deans would still seek to balance their classes by enrolling a diverse mix of majors from many states and countries. Colleges would still need enough oboe players and theater-arts majors.

"What compels institutions to change is deep discontent," said Marie Bigham, director of college counseling at Isidore Newman School, in New Orleans. "If they're only making changes on the margins, it indicates that they're mostly content with the way things are."

That leads to a big question in an age of widening social inequality. How unhappy are the wealthiest colleges, really, with the status quo? Some of the nation's most selective institutions enroll more students from the top 1 percent of the income ladder than from the bottom 60 percent. Is that simply because of lack of preparation in the K-12 system? Flaws within the selection process? Or is it evidence, as Dr. Harper suggests, of a systemic lack of will to change those numbers?

Jon Boeckenstedt, associate vice president for enrollment management and marketing at DePaul University, says that it is the high-profile colleges that have the power to redefine the admissions process.

"Unless and until something changes at the top, nothing else is going to change," he said. "That's because, at a lot of colleges, people will go to their graves trying to imitate the Ivy League."

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