



THE EDUCATION CONSERVANCY

Conceiving an Exemplary College Admissions System 3/2010

The choice of a college or university is among the most important decisions many young people can make in life. Very often the range of contenders for a young person's favors, the strength and volatility of emotions, the influence of family, financial implications, and the seeming finality of the decision invite a comparison to choosing a spouse. The drama of courtship has lent itself to comic treatment through the ages, depicting the antics of young people trying on different identities, discovering who they are and what they seek to become, and finally committing themselves for life to another in marriage, as the Shakespearean song goes, "Jack shall have Jill; Naught shall go ill . . . and all shall be well."

But all is not well in the process of college admissions. It is a "system" that judges and sorts prospective students by criteria that unduly favor those who have had great social, economic, and educational advantages in youth, often at the expense of less privileged students for whom a college education could make a transformational difference in life. It is a set of processes that draws universities and colleges into an arms race to attract the most promising students by traditional and standardized measures, creating more homogeneous institutions as each sacrifices individuality to make rank. College admissions has become an arena in which the signals sent to young people have less to do with the core educational values of learning and growth – less to do with developing a capacity for independent thinking, empathy, and moral judgment that allow graduates to contribute to society as engaged citizens – more to do with gaining access to a limited good that entitles one to a life of individual advantage regardless of others.

In early 2010 the Education Conservancy convened a meeting to consider qualities of an exemplary system of college admissions. The goal of the meeting was to engage the thinking of a diverse group of scholars and practitioners whose work has touched on the question of what an exemplary system would be. Our group included researchers in multiple academic disciplines as well as leaders who have served in a variety of institutional roles. Our hope through these exchanges was to offer a set of perspectives beyond what the national discussion of higher education admission thus far has yielded. This essay reflects central themes from the discussion and includes suggestions for change and action beyond this initial meeting.

Less than Ideal

Defining an exemplary system of college admissions requires both a consideration of current reality and vision of how that reality could be improved. The road to “exemplary” traverses a landscape of actions and consequences, some of which epitomize the worst of college admissions. We travel this route in hopes of discovering the potential for improvement and acting concertedly to achieve the best of what is possible.

In one sense higher education admissions can be simply described: It is a process by which students seeking a college come to identify an institution that answers to their educational interests, aspirations, and needs. Ideally it is a process through which high school students come to understand more clearly the particular interests and strengths they have, and to discover through comparison and considered reflection the kind of university or college that engages those interests in the most promising and effective ways. An exemplary admissions process is one that effectively matches the unique characteristics of students with unique characteristics of institutions in order to achieve optimal learning. Such a process should be able to foster thoughtful decision making and excitement about next steps, while helping students develop the goals and habits of mind that make them better learners in college.

From the standpoint of universities and colleges, an exemplary system of admissions is one that would encourage and reward institutions for the distinctive missions they pursue in addressing the educational needs of students. An exemplary system is one that makes an optimal contribution to the ability of colleges and universities to deliver on the values that should guide, and the values that should constrain, their continued operation in a democratic society like ours.

By its nature, any admissions system allocates opportunity and value, determining who gets what and how. Certainly college admissions is not a system in the sense that a single agent exerts central control, as in a state university or college system. Individual institutions have the freedom to act in what they perceive to be their own best interests. In a collective sense, however, these actions define systemic behaviors which result from the competition among students, on the one hand, and among institutions on the other. Higher education admissions is a stratified system serving students of different preparation, aspirations, and socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, college admissions links virtually all institutions together through a common aspiration to status and prestige. As such, it is a phenomenon in which the actions of a comparatively small number of institutions, reinforced by media and other forces external to higher education, impact the allocation of educational opportunity and values at all levels. Through the interactions of institutions and students, an admissions system comes to identify what qualities are most important in determining the kinds of educational opportunities young people should be offered or denied.

Fundamentally, an exemplary college admissions process should be characterized by integrity, fairness, and transparency. All too often, however, the admissions process reveals universities and colleges engaging in behaviors that compromise their educational mission and values in order to appear more attractive to students and parents. Many find the system to be anything except transparent in terms of how decisions are reached, who is chosen from the pool of applicants, and why. Often, as in the case of athletic or legacy admits, it is a process through which institutions accept students by criteria having little to do with educational mission or standards. Too often it is a system that accords disproportionate attention and favor to those who have received the greatest educational and economic advantages through life – a system that is less than exemplary in attracting and successfully educating a student body characterized by diversity of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The admissions system in its current state reveals a frequent misalignment between professed institutional values and actual practices in the marketplace. The signs of this disparity can be seen in institutions that spend increasing amounts to position themselves favorably in national rankings and mount intensive, often high-pressure appeals to attract student applications – only to turn down large numbers of students in order to bolster the appearance of selectivity.

No one imagines a higher education system in which there is not competition for limited spaces in the most selective institutions. Yet the extent to which market strategy supplants educational values as the central motivation in both students and institutions can be seen in the fact that there are four industries with revenues exceeding \$1 billion that focus on the college admissions process: guidebooks/rankings; test-preparation; enrollment consultants for institutions; and admissions consultants for students.

When an admissions system comes to seem out of key with higher education's core educational values, adverse consequences can occur on several levels:

- *The composition of the student body.* The inordinate focus on the most selective segment of the higher education market causes many institutions to emulate the practices and aspire to the circumstances of the top 100 institutions that attract the most competitive students by traditional measures of grades and standardized test scores. As more institutions divert funds from need- to merit-based financial aid, the admissions system becomes inherently less fair in offering educational opportunity and attracting a student body representing a breadth of educational, financial, and cultural backgrounds characteristic of the nation itself. Colleges are not rewarded or recognized for matching institutional strengths with student characteristics in order to maximize educational outcome and contributions to serving the public interest.
- *The way that high schools perceive and carry out their educational missions.* Signals about the importance of measures such as status, rank, and standardized test scores

often have undue influence on high schools. As high schools come to be judged increasingly by their students' average SAT/ACT scores and the percentage of graduates admitted to top-ranked universities and colleges, the emphasis can shift away from education as a process of challenge and growth; the standardized test itself can become inordinately influential in curriculum development, pedagogy, and resource allocation. Testing well appears to have more value than genuine learning in school or the development of cultural capital in society. The race to produce test score winners influences the ways that resources are allocated within schools, often widening disparities between schools on different ends of the socio-economic spectrum.

- *The behaviors of high school students with respect to their course choices in preparation for applying for college.* Too often the message students glean from the admissions process is that not being accepted by highly prominent and selective institutions constitutes a failure in life. Growing cynicism often accompanies anxiety as high school students come to perceive college admissions as a competition for a coveted prize, in which the most important goal is to finish first at any cost. The necessity of maintaining a high grade point average often discourages students from taking more challenging high school courses that could result in a lower grade.
- *The attitudes that students form about learning.* The experience of college admissions conditions students to regard higher education primarily as gaining a credential that confers a life of advantage. For many students learning itself comes to seem less important as a central purpose of a college education; as such, institutions are less likely to educate students who make valuable contributions to the state of knowledge and its application to societal problems.
- *The development of students as future citizens.* The experience of college admissions contributes to a disposition that regards seeking personal advantage as a paramount goal and weakens the ethic of service in students; as such, the experience diminishes the ability of universities and colleges to educate students who collectively contribute to the social and civic vitality of the nation through the pursuit of service professions. The prevailing tendency is rather to choose more remunerative careers that advance one's personal well being.

The combined elements of the college admission process send signals that shape the motivations of young people, the actions they take, their dispositions toward learning, and the attitudes they form about themselves and the society of which they are part. In doing so the current college admission system goes beyond allocating educational opportunity to determining the value and values associated with education in general. Too often the admissions experience reinforces in students and parents a disposition to regard college itself as simply another hurdle to scale in positioning oneself for admission to the most selective professional or graduate

schools. Learning per se comes to have little meaning or value apart from its ability to confer distinction on those vying for competitive advantage in lucrative fields.

A portrait of college students that emerges, not so much from formal polls as from the data of human experience, is of a generation that is risk-averse, a cohort whose daily lives are fragmented, tethered to media and communication devices, with comparatively little time to reflect. While they may conceive of themselves as someday taking actions that benefit society as a whole, very often young people think it impossible to devote substantial time to others' well-being beyond the minimal, largely symbolic gesture of service activity now expected as part of college preparation and attendance. Young people find it harder than their counterparts in previous times to cite strong role models, and their grounding in ethical principles tends not to be strong; many find it hard to think that a person caught cheating or faking academic credentials has done anything substantially wrong.

Young people correctly perceive the college admissions process as a winner-take-all process; many regard admission to a highly ranked university or college as the passage to a life of advantage. From this perspective, the primary purpose of attending college is to gain a credential that places one ahead of the pack in competing for success in the workplace and in society. Everything is ranked, or it should be. Those who gain admission to a highly selective institution often choose career paths based on the likelihood of earning a large salary, rather than from a commitment to public service or civic engagement.

The college admissions process encourages young people to embrace uncritically the values they see mirrored elsewhere in society. The functioning of this system elicits a cynical focus on Money, Markets, and Me. An exemplary system of college admissions would help to draw out a broader commitment to Excellence, Engagement, and Ethics. It would be a system that encourages young people to conceive their futures not just in terms of Me but also to act on the potential of collective action – the power of We – to bring about improvement in societal well-being. It would celebrate and inspire students' curiosity, imagination, and sense of wonder, as well as the self-confidence to explore new interests and take the risks associated with the attainment of greater cultural awareness and self-knowledge. An exemplary system of admissions is one that would help students become excited about college as an opportunity for genuine learning and growth.

Seeing the System Whole

As with any generation, the habits and orientation of today's young people are shaped by the environment in which they have come of age. The college admissions process is not solely responsible for the characteristics sketched above. Yet there is no question that college admission has become a prominent experience in young peoples' lives – one that reflects and

promotes dominant cultural themes. An important question to ask is to what extent the college admissions system offers students a prospect of a different narrative – an opportunity to pursue an alternative set of values and motivations – one that aligns more clearly with the educational missions of four-year universities and colleges. To what extent does the college admission process encourage students to pursue knowledge and develop the skills not just to succeed in their individual capacities but also to contribute to the civic, social, and political vitality of the society of which they are part?

Universities and colleges are bankers of social capital. In sending their children to college, families give something precious to these institutions. Higher education institutions have an obligation in return to educate graduates who make valuable contributions to society while also enhancing their individual well-being.

In this context a series of questions regarding the college admissions process becomes especially pertinent. How well does the college admission process itself contribute to the fostering of intellectual curiosity and habits of mind that cause one to look beyond oneself, to develop empathy for others, and to value learning as a lifetime pursuit of growth? To what degree does the admission process encourage students to consider higher education as a key to a vital democratic system of government? How well does the system encourage students to regard their undergraduate education as preparing them to contribute to the well-being of a local community and to society in general?

A candid accounting of higher education admissions in its current state reveals a system that is competitive, multiple, and stratified – one in which the behaviors of institutions and students in the most visible and elite segments exert disproportionate influence on the attitudes and motivations of the whole. It is a system that has the potential to bring out the best in institutions and in prospective students, though it seems often to bring out the worst qualities of both. At present it is a system that conveys the message that “You are where you go” – a system that confers advantage to some by standards of judgment that appear arbitrary and opaque, a system that seems content to perpetuate social inequality and unearned privilege, a system that diminishes diversity and intellectual richness within colleges and among students.

It is not likely that any single accounting of this system in itself can change the fact of competition. Neither is it likely that a single institution can transform the system through its actions. But it may be possible to help the system become more transparent, more equitable in its operations, and better able to link distinctive characteristics of students with signature qualities of different universities and colleges.

Any effort to conceive an exemplary process of college admission must consider not just the 18% of the college-going population that seeks to attend one of the nation’s selective

medallion institutions, but also the 18 million undergraduates who seek an education in one of the nation's four-year colleges and universities. An exemplary system should be one that serves the needs of this larger student population, both in the admissions process and in the education students receive once enrolled. It would be one that succeeds in matching unique institutional strengths with corresponding student characteristics in order to maximize desired educational outcomes.

In fact the external context for college admissions has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. In the mid-twentieth century a smaller percentage (roughly 10 %) of the population pursued a college education, and universities and colleges spent less money recruiting students. Today, some 67% of high school graduates pursue some form of higher education. The mid-century acceptance rate to institutions like Harvard and Yale was 50– 60%, rather than the single-digit percentages we have seen in the early 21st century. It was the GI Bill, begun as a policy initiative to avert soaring unemployment following the return of veterans from the Second World War, that began the process of broadening the base of college-educated people in this nation. This formative act of public policy was the first of several steps that committed the nation to a vision of higher education as a pathway to the American dream, making it possible for people of all backgrounds to advance beyond their original economic circumstance. The founding of community colleges through the 1950s and '60s, the Education Amendments of the late 1960s and early '70s, through which the federal government acted to ensure that no student who sought to gain a higher education would be excluded by financial limitations – these steps in conjunction with rising education and skill requirements in the workforce have combined to make a college education a necessary component for a productive and fulfilling life as a member of the workforce and as a contributing citizen to a deliberative society founded on democratic principles.

Societal changes themselves exert significant pressure on the college admission process. Higher education's institutional capacity has not increased appreciably in the U.S. for the past 15 years, even as demand for higher education has grown. As a result, a growing population of those who could benefit from higher education is not being served. As the financial meltdown of the past two years leaves state governments increasingly strapped for funds, public universities and colleges have experienced sizeable reductions in state support, and the question of what students to recruit and admit becomes increasingly difficult for institutions that have a mission to provide expanded opportunity to students who may lack a strong tradition of college attendance. Higher education institutions have historically served as engines of social mobility for young people in the United States. As the admissions process evolves in response to the competition for institutional prestige and advantage, these institutions can also become agents of social division and exclusion. When a public research university founded in part to serve the educational needs of a state's citizens enrolls a student body of which less than 10 percent has

financial need, it speaks to a set of institutional priorities that are less focused on broad access, more on the institutional advantages of selectivity.

The state of college admissions reveals that colleges, as educational institutions held in public trust, have done a poor job of defining the standards by which they should be judged. All too often institutions aspire to better their circumstance – in the rankings and in public esteem – by seeking to become more selective and attracting students whose academic performance and standardized test scores indicate they are most likely to succeed. Institutions have every incentive to pursue this strategy in an educational system that values status and prestige more than the value-added that results from successful student learning. Institutions that choose to advance such a narrowly defined self-interest risk turning their backs on the students they were founded to serve, inviting comparison to a hospital that admits only the healthiest patients with the best insurance policies.

On Learning – A Missing Voice

One factor that appears not to figure in any significant degree amid the hype and clamoring that surrounds college admissions is learning. The quality and extent of learning do not lend themselves to simple measurement, and learning occupies a remarkably small space in the considerations that guide college choice. To be sure, a growing number of institutions have taken initial steps to gauge the quality of learning their students experience through such means as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). It is interesting to note that the universities and colleges least inclined to participate in these or similar efforts to gauge learning are those at the most selective and competitive end of the spectrum. For institutions and for students alike, what is important is not the learning a student will experience; it is simply the fact of being there.

As institutions grow more concerned with the attributes of admitted students than with the learning that results from the curriculum, a natural result is to focus on students who are deemed most likely to succeed in college. High school grades and standardized tests serve as proxies for educational achievement and promise. A willingness to rely on these gauges as primary if not sole measures of suitability for college admission results in a system that inherently excludes large numbers of students who seek a college education. It is telling to observe that half a million PSAT-takers last year received no communication from any college or university inviting them to consider applying; students with lower test scores are considered inferior currency in this realm.

Far more attractive are those with scores at the other end of the spectrum – students whose grades and scores make them valuable goods to institutions seeking to bolster their reputations by the competitive status of students they matriculate. Attracting high-achieving

students counts for more than anything an institution might do to challenge students' thinking and enhance their intellectual or moral development once enrolled. A faculty member at one of the nation's most selective universities once observed, "Too often we're content to pride ourselves on admitting the most accomplished self-starters in the nation. By the time they graduate, the best we can say is that we've done them no harm."

An analogous practice among institutions with a broad-access mission is to matriculate large numbers of students in order to benefit from state policies that fund public institutions by enrollment rather than persistence. In this case the practice of admitting students and then failing to ensure that they receive the support required to make suitable academic progress results in students who withdraw, often with educational debt for a higher education experience that ultimately conferred no material benefit or advancement in life. An exemplary admission process is one that includes a sustained focus on retention as well as student progress in reaching their learning goals.

The inordinate focus on the front end of recruitment has the effect of homogenizing higher education, causing every institution to look increasingly alike as each targets its recruitment efforts to a comparatively narrow segment of students distinguished by strong grades and test scores. Universities and colleges have fewer incentives to look beyond these generic measures to cultivate a class of students who exemplify qualities that resonate with particular elements of an educational mission or a vision of the kind of qualities the institution seeks to instill in its graduates.

If an institution takes seriously a mission to foster certain qualities it considers very important in its graduates – for example, if it seeks very deliberately to instill the value and practice of critical thinking, inquiry, and debate that provide the underpinnings of participation in a democracy – then that mission should inform the materials it sends to prospective students, its marketing and recruitment activities, as well as the criteria it applies to shape its incoming class. A clear and coherent philosophy of education has the effect of limiting the size of the recruitment pool. This approach to the admissions process, however, stands in direct contrast to the more common practice of recruiting broadly and attracting as many applications as possible, only to turn down a substantial portion of the students applying in order to benefit in the standard measures of institutional stature.

The pressures of conformity and homogenization have caused a growing number of institutions to adopt a standard admission form – an action that offers the benefit of efficiency, though at the expense of ignoring important individual differences among students as well as among universities and colleges. As in the Malvina Reynolds song, the resulting scenario portrays a growing number of higher education institutions as "little boxes, all the same." In

adopting highly standardized procedures, institutions sacrifice any sense of distinctiveness in their own missions.

The faculty are perhaps the most important stakeholders who could positively affect the operations of the higher education admissions system toward a more explicit focus on learning. The collective voice of faculty would certainly be heeded if it issued a call for admissions reform to yield a class of students more concerned with intellectual development and growth than with gaining an educational credential – a class of students more focused on the mission and core values of the institution than on the external trappings of achievement that a degree from a selective institution confers.

The voices of faculty members, however, have been conspicuously absent from the discussion of higher education admissions, either in a national context or in the context of their own institutions. As such, faculty are in silent complicity with the drift of college admissions to a process that is less transparent, more arbitrary in the qualities it rewards, and more disconnected from educational values. Regardless of the institution in which they are presently employed, most faculty members today have been trained in one of the top 100 research universities in the U.S. Each would inherently like to recreate in his or her current institution the environment of high-level intellectual engagement that motivated one's own decision to pursue an academic career. To the extent that their institution appears to be growing more selective, more closely resembling the institutions they knew as graduate students, faculty members seemingly approve the trend. High-achieving students are the hallmark of any institution concerned with growing its reputation; an admission system that yields that result for a particular college or university will likely appear to be functioning effectively to faculty members, regardless of the criteria and practices used to recruit those students, or the qualities of students who were left behind.

The Importance of Good Advice

No other system of higher education resembles that of the United States in its commitment to access as well as quality – to making a higher education available and affordable to all who seek to learn and succeed. There are some aspects of this system that work fairly well. The American system of financial aid, for example, while not devoid of problems, operates in a fairly even-handed way to avert discrimination and make it possible for students from a broad socioeconomic stratum to pursue a college education.

Given the breadth of background in those who aspire to attend college, there are four key drivers of success in high school students planning to apply: preparation (access to cultural capital); motivation (the effort expended in reaching one's goals); a realistic understanding of life's possibilities; and the system of admissions and financial aid for higher education. To

succeed in this process, it is important that high school students have access to good advice in preparing for the college admissions process. In matters of financing, and in college choice itself, the system needs to work for these students rather than against them.

Unfortunately there are major disparities in the quality of advising students receive in the course of their high school years. The ratio of public high school guidance and admissions counselors ranges from 203 per student to 1076 per student – far beyond the 100 per student ratio recommended by counseling organizations. In fact, Pat McDonough’s research in 2005 found that the average high school student receives an estimated 38 minutes of college counseling per year. Students with inadequate recourse to good advice often lack the guidance to make appropriate choices in curriculum through their high school years, and they often forgo key opportunities they have not fully understood, which could result in their never applying to institutions for which they would have qualified. High school students and their families also need access to information and advice regarding the financing of a college education through federal, state and institutional programs that make it possible to meet the costs of attendance. College guidance is a high priority for public high schools in wealthier districts. For schools in lower-income settings it is less of a priority, with the result that too many disadvantaged students never enjoy the benefits of personalized college counseling or gain a full understanding of what possibilities exist for attending college and what opportunities could result from completing a degree.

Leadership and Collaboration

Bringing about a positive change to the college admission system will require leadership from the 100 or so universities and colleges that enjoy a high degree of visibility and attention. Considered in the least flattering light, elite higher education institutions may appear as complicit agents in conferring privilege on a select group of people, some of whom are undeserving, in a society that is unequal. It is not likely that this system, so deeply entwined with the underpinnings of society itself, can be transformed entirely, but it could be possible to inject a greater ethic of service into elite institutions, and to elicit through exemplary leadership a vision of a system that serves students and educational values more effectively than at present. One provocative question might be, “If we cannot rely on our most trusted institutions to do the right thing, then whom can we expect to provide positive leadership?”

For selective institutions the leadership role would not consist of admitting an entirely different student body. What these institutions can do, however, is take more deliberate steps to encourage their students to reflect more deeply about their aspirations and societal roles. The key questions for the nation’s most powerful and influential universities and colleges become: What actions can we take within the context of selectivity to educate more students who seek careers of service to society? What are the possibilities for shaping an incoming class and reinforcing

the ethic of service during the undergraduate years such that more graduates devote at least part of their lives to a program such as Teach for America – rather than immediately seeking a career in the most lucrative fields?

Making genuine progress toward an exemplary system of higher education admissions must entail something more than simply registering dissent. The key questions for higher education institutions in general become: What positive steps can we take, individually or collectively, that would begin to send different signals to young people applying to college? What actions can reduce the frenzy that the admissions process often creates in young people? How can institutions assert educational jurisdiction in what has become the marketplace of college admissions?

Given the size and complexity of the college admissions process, the likelihood of achieving positive reform will increase to the extent that institutions work together toward common goals. It should be possible for higher education institutions, working collaboratively, to create some middle ground for experimentation – in which, for example, universities and colleges admit some of their students on a somewhat different basis and track their academic progress toward a degree. This could be a step in better aligning institutional practice with educational values. Collaboration among several institutions would increase the scale of such experimentation and increase the likelihood of its results having a broader impact on the admissions practices of other institutions. Collaboration could minimize risk associated with individual action. Collaboration may be the only chance for colleges and universities to escape a “tragedy of the commons” that would otherwise result as growing numbers of institutions compete more aggressively to enroll a limited cohort of students deemed most desirable by criteria that are established mainly by external agencies and often have little to do with educational values. Collaboration could provide venues that allow educational ideals to inform action within the competitive restraints that otherwise impede the ability of colleges and universities to act morally.

In time these exploratory ventures could produce a coherent set of narratives to counter the prevailing ethos of college admissions as a winner-take-all system that confers advantage on those who have enjoyed greatest economic and educational privileges throughout life.

An example of a compelling counter-narrative can be found in the story of one liberal arts college; through a deliberative campus dialogue the college identified a kind of student it sought particularly to attract – students who value service and gain fulfillment in working with others to effect a positive difference in society. Having identified key characteristics of students it felt it could serve particularly well, the college changed its marketing to attract more students of this kind. Over the course of five years the college found that this practice did not adversely affect grade point or retention of students. In addition, the recast admissions emphasis succeeded in

attracting more students of the kind the college sought particularly to include among its entering classes.

Other colleges have eliminated or scaled back early admission programs, de-emphasized standardized testing and instituted new criteria for evaluation, ceased cooperating with major media rankings projects and stopped advertising their rank, supported and participated in efforts to develop alternatives to rankings, reigned in merit aid while increasing need-based aid, and undertaken serious attempts to align admission practices with espoused educational values.

In looking beyond the standard measures of grades and test scores and conveying this message in its marketing, an institution takes an inherent risk: such an action may cause it to attract a smaller pool of qualified applicants. As the size of the applicant pool decreases, it is possible that both the admit rate and yield would suffer, even if the profile of students were to suit the institution's educational strengths exactly. Paradoxically, an institution could find itself fulfilling its educational mission more effectively than ever, only to be devalued in the institutional rankings that can influence college choice. We might call this leadership.

A story of this kind exemplifies what we call a counter-narrative – an action that moves upstream against the current that otherwise lures institutions to look and act in exactly the same ways. A similar step that one highly selective institution has taken is to restrict its search function, reducing by half the number of contacts it sends to prospective students. In taking this step the institution has effectively reduced the number of applications it will receive from high school students whose chances of being admitted are lowest. It will also turn away fewer students, which causes the institution's admissions rate to suffer on the scale of selectivity in the rankings. Yet this action exemplifies an institution working proactively to bring about positive change to the system. It runs counter to the natural proclivity of institutions to solicit as many applications as possible, and it avoids raising the hopes of many students only to reject them at the point of admissions. It could be considered noble and purposeful action beyond self interest – requiring the kind of moral fortitude and character most colleges claim they are charged to instill in students.

A collection of such stories as these could contribute significantly to the understanding of how institutional leadership helps to restore the centrality of educational values to the admissions process, resulting in better alignment of student interests and distinctive institutional strengths, and creating a system that is more fair and equitable in its allocation of opportunity to students of different aspirations, goals, and economic background. We seek in particular to highlight counter-narratives of institutions that structure their admissions program to reflect the intellectual demands and opportunities of the curriculum, as well as the cultivation of ethical values that students could expect if admitted.

There are many actors in the drama that constitutes college admissions. We offer initial suggestions for actions that could help create an admissions system that comes closer to exemplary than the one currently in place:

Higher Education Institutions

- Consider how the admissions and marketing activities of individual institutions act collectively to shape the way education is perceived and pursued among students and high schools. Evaluate current practices according to public interest impact and explore ways of collaborating with other institutions to improve the “system effects” of college admissions.
- Regularly validate the use of institutional admission criteria to confirm their value and significance. Develop and employ admissions criteria that are most clearly associated with student success, that take into account factors beyond grades and standardized test scores in determining students’ suitability for enrollment and likely success. Explore methods of discerning qualities in students that suggest a very conducive fit with an institution’s mission and core educational goals. View the admission core process as an educational experience for students – one that is worthy of colleges’ professional expertise and appropriate involvement; recast admissions materials as necessary to emphasize the qualities being sought in students. Recognize and understand the negative impact of the current college admissions system on students, and pursue opportunities to take corrective action.
- Take actions to collaborate both within and across market segments in seeking an admissions system more aptly attuned to the educational values at the core of virtually any institutional mission.
- Conduct small-scale admissions experiments to admit students by criteria that differ from the standard indices, ideally in conjunction with other institutions pursuing similar experiments.
- Engage faculty members in formulating goals for admissions that temper the preoccupation with selectivity and include a greater emphasis on students’ potential for learning once enrolled.
- Engage other kinds of perspectives and expertise in the college admissions process, using technology as appropriate to engage the thinking of people who are not part of an institution but could nonetheless provide valuable insights into an institution’s admissions practices.
- Strike a more principled approach to college admissions – one that accords more clearly with educational ideals and is characterized by honesty, clarity, humility, and integrity.
- Let the college exercise its own voice and identity through its admissions outreach efforts.

- Resist the impulse to manage image and admission policies by arbitrary systems of ranking that can lead institutions to forsake a type of student they were founded to serve. Resist the impulse to distinguish the institution by advertising institutional rank.
- Seize college admissions as an arena for educational leadership.

High Schools

- Take steps to ensure that high school students and their families have access to good-quality advising, helping to increase their understanding of the college admissions process and the choices they have.
- Develop an educationally-based (value-centered) approach to college counseling.
- Collaborate with other schools to resist the influences of commercial admissions, such as the ranking of high schools, test prep, and private consultants for middle and high school students.
- Find ways to acknowledge those colleges that are acting to improve the admissions landscape.
- Invite these college leaders to speak to your parents, boards, and PTA's.
- Recognize that each educational stakeholder has a role to play in improving college admissions; we all have potential for educational pay-off.

State Governments

- State governments should consider recasting the funding mechanisms by which they support public universities and colleges. In most cases the funding process rewards institutions by initial enrollment rather than persistence toward the degree or the development of learning skills and the attainment of knowledge; too often this model encourages public institutions to matriculate large numbers of students who subsequently drop out, having incurred debt without benefiting from the experience of higher education.
- Reconsider the use of merit scholarship in light of current evidence and public interest values and purposes. Data show that such scholarship drastically favor advantaged students at the expense of diversity and access, while simultaneously decreasing institutional revenue that should come from those advantaged students.

Collective Actions

- Ask ourselves two questions: Does the current admission system resemble one that as educators we would create? And, how will this system continue to evolve in the absence of our own corrective action?

- Recognize that college admissions has become a venue of significant educational influence, one that cries out for educational leadership from colleges.
- Engage a large-scale national dialogue that revisits the educational purposes that colleges and universities seek to advance in the United States, and that considers the ways in which the admissions process helps to advance or detract from those purposes.
- Undertake a concerted effort to create and publish other narratives about the college experience and the pathways to which it leads upon graduation. There is a need to create a coherent body of narratives to counter the prevalent story of college as simply the means to advancement and personal success. Take concerted steps, for example, to convey the value of Teach for America as a counter-narrative to a career in investment banking.
- Undertake other means of evaluating institutions, taking into account qualitative as well as quantitative comparisons in order to provide visible incentives for change.
- Provide outreach and education to advance public perspective on appropriate and meaningful measures of success.
- Support and participate in efforts to align admission practices with educational purposes.
- Work with test providers to ensure that tests are as good as they can be and that the quality and deployment of instructions and training on proper usage of scores meet public-interest standards.

A Space for Moral Action

The content and tenor of our own discussion clearly indicated that there are further steps to take in achieving an exemplary admissions system. Convening this group was an experiment to discover the extended range of insight and observation on this subject and to gauge how strong an alignment might exist between these different strands. We believe that the experiment was successful, and that further actions should follow from the thinking that emerged. Beyond the production and dissemination of a white paper to heighten general awareness of the issues, further progress could result by engaging scholars from a variety of fields who bring insights and expertise to certain aspects of the higher education admission system. A collection of essays based on such explorations could provide solid foundations for building an admissions system that serves the educational goals and purposes of students, of colleges and universities, and of the nation itself more effectively than the one we currently have. The participants in our exemplary admissions discussion could undertake a series of explorations to analyze the current system and identify an action agenda that could spur meaningful reform. Another possibility is a Summit on Admissions – a national conference orchestrated to bring together the various threads of admissions research and reform, assess comprehensively prospects for fundamental change, and develop an agenda for action.

Working together in the cause of admissions reform, members of the Exemplary Admissions discussion group could model the kind of collaboration that needs to occur among higher education institutions themselves to effect meaningful change. The combination of what we have called counter-narratives with analytic essays yielding action agendas could produce what Lyle Spencer, founder of the Spencer Foundation, called “germinal thought” – powerful ideas that emanate widely from their sources, helping to strengthen the social fabric of society and its institutions.

In one sense it may be an impossible task to achieve an ideal or exemplary system of college admissions. Too many interests are at stake to bring about a broad reform in a single stroke; the forces of competition, on the one hand, and of tradition on the other, have the effect of constraining the options available to any institution seeking to reform the system. At the same time, ideals can – some say must – serve to inform the choices that higher education institutions make, individually and collectively, to bring about a system that aligns more closely with the educational values that universities and colleges were founded to advance.

Too often what institutions and their leaders regard as fixed constraints are simply the result of choices they have made. Any institution that genuinely seeks to improve the admissions system can discover some space to act morally, to be proactive in the cause of reform, and to distinguish itself as a leader. At a time when a major recession has brought an increased scrutiny of higher education costs and raised questions about its commitment to access, diversity, and successful student achievement, the present moment offers a unique opportunity for universities and colleges to act in ways that yield a more transparent and equitable system of college admissions – a system that approaches the designation of exemplary.

[Box Text]

The essay, “Conceiving an Exemplary College Admissions System,” derives from a roundtable of educational researchers and practitioners concerned about the system of higher education admissions in the United States. The meeting was convened by the Education Conservancy in January 2010 and funded by the Spencer Foundation. The following individuals were participants in the discussion, and their contributions helped to shape the essay’s central themes.

[List of participants organized alphabetically by last name, including institutional affiliation.]