



Insights into the 2018 College Admissions Cycle

For many college applicants and admissions officers, 2018 was a particularly challenging year due to a surge in applications virtually everywhere – in colleges and universities large and small, public as well as private. On average, applications were up 7%, but at individual institutions the increase ranged from 6% to as much as 25%. How are we to understand and respond to this phenomenon? That was the question posed to a panel of six admissions officers at the April conference of the Independent Education Consultants Association.

Several factors seem to be causing the surge: an increase in the number of American high school graduates who will be the first in their families to attend college, an increase in the number of foreigners applying to American schools, and an increase in the number of colleges to which individual students are applying. The first two of these factors are actually contributing to the third because when students see colleges becoming more selective each year and outcomes consequently more difficult to predict, their inclination is to hedge their bets by applying to more places. A desire to compare financial aid offers has the same effect.

Additionally, as increasing the diversity of the student body has become virtually every college's goal, institutions that were previously regional are now sending teams of admissions officers all over the nation and even the world to recruit applicants from afar who never would have heard of them in the past.

Although increased selectivity helps colleges rise in the rankings, the admissions officers on the conference panel all lamented the current situation because it is extremely challenging to assemble a balanced freshman class of a particular size from a pool that includes ever more applicants who might eventually opt not to attend.

To hedge their own bets, colleges are deferring more “early action” (non-binding early) applicants and increasing their reliance on wait lists. They are also doing everything they can to ensure that the students they do admit will choose to attend. Hence, many schools are filling almost 50% of their incoming class with students who applied under a binding early decision plan. To get the best students they can this way, a number of them have added an Early Decision 2 option. ED2 deadlines are usually the same as regular decision deadlines, allowing students denied

admission to the “reach” school where they applied ED in the fall to commit now to another school with a slightly higher admit rate.

In an effort to predict likelihood that a particular applicant will attend if offered admission, a majority of colleges are now employing a company called Slate Analytics that mines data found to be predictive in the past. Such data includes information on which applicants open their email from the school, follow the school on Facebook and Twitter, engage with the admissions office multiple ways, and so forth. Of course, the panelists noted, if applicants all know they have to do something in particular to demonstrate interest, they will all do it regardless of the depth of their interest, and then that particular piece of data will cease to be predictive.

So what really does make an application stand out, the panelists were asked. At every school with a supplemental application essay asking students to write about why they wish to attend, that’s what the admissions officer spoke about. Cautioning students not to just copy information off their websites, these panelists stressed repeatedly that they are most impressed by students who really “get” their school, who have done the research to figure out what distinguishes it from other schools and who can articulate what makes it a particularly good fit for them.

One final word of advice from these admissions officers was to be genuine. They say they can tell when applicants are just giving them what they think they want to hear, and they are extremely turned off by essays that don’t sound as if they were written by a 17-year-old. Such essays only tell them that when under pressure, the applicant does not trust his or her own voice.