



Predicting Admissions Policies at Selective Colleges in 2025

A sea change in college admissions practices is coming soon, according to a panel of university deans who spoke on October 14th at the National Association of College Admissions Counselors' (NACAC) conference in Boston.

Part of the change will be driven by demographics. By 2025 there will be a small increase in the total number of American high school graduates, but this will be predominantly in the number of Hispanic graduates. The number of Asian and African-American graduates is projected to remain steady, while the number of white graduates will decline all across the country, most dramatically in the Northeast and Midwest.

Along with the increase in racial and ethnic diversity will come an increase in the number of American high school graduates who are the first in their family to attend college and who typically have more limited means. In fact, by 2025, 426,000 more graduates are projected to come from families with lower-than-average incomes than do today.

The challenge of ascertaining the likeliness that applicants from such disadvantaged backgrounds will succeed at their college or university is increasingly driving the conversation amongst admissions officers about what criteria ought to be included when assessing applicants. It is recognized that students who have not benefited from the opportunities for enrichment and test preparation that their more economically privileged peers have had may nonetheless be highly successful in college.

While core academic skills in math, science and language will continue to hold great importance in the college admissions process, in many admissions offices assessment of these already is and will continue to be augmented by an examination of other factors as well.

"Holistic" is the term used to describe an application review process that considers more than just grades and test scores. Robert Massa, Dean of Enrollment Management at Drew University, spoke of the importance of including assessment of critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and self-knowledge as well as ethical competency. Drew and many other schools are increasingly looking for performance-based evidence of character traits that recent studies have deemed to

be essential for success in college and beyond. These include grit, perseverance, organization, self-discipline, curiosity, and the ability to work with a team.

Also driving the conversation about admissions are two recent initiatives coming out of academia, one proposing a so-called Mastery Transcript to replace the current style high school transcript, and the other proposing that the entire admissions process be revamped to stop rewarding and thus fostering excessively intense competition and focus on personal success.

Richard Weissbourd at the Harvard Graduate School of Education was the lead author of a widely-discussed paper that came out in 2015 entitled “Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions.” The paper argues, “College admissions can send compelling messages that both ethical engagement – especially concern for others and the common good – and intellectual engagement are highly important.

The even more revolutionary Mastery Transcript is being promoted by a consortium of educators who want to replace course credits with measures of competencies. Arguing that it makes no sense to measure learning by how many classroom hours a student has accrued, they are developing ways of measuring and reporting such competencies as: analytical and creative thinking, complex oral and written communication, leadership and teamwork, digital and quantitative literacy, global perspective, adaptability, initiative and risk-taking, integrity and ethical decision making, creativity and persistence. Although it was pioneered predominantly by educators at private schools, according to The New York Times more than 40 public schools in New York City are now using the Mastery Transcript, admittedly many of them intermediate rather than secondary schools.

The audience at the NACAC conference was somewhat skeptical that the Mastery Transcript will take off in the way its proponents predict, but there is no question that many colleges have already developed their own rubrics whereby readers of applications seek to assess and reward various attributes they can detect from essays, recommendations, and interviews.

Everyone who reads applications to Bucknell University is trained to flag evidence of seven such attributes. Carnegie Mellon incorporates an assessment of leadership, service, and grit. The University of Rochester assigns scores for the student’s impact on his or her community and personal values. Santa Clara examines applicants’ community service and for evidence of ethical engagement and concern for others. Swarthmore looks for evidence of empathy and the ability to seek and find solutions in a collaborative way. And the list goes on.

Princeton’s Dean of Admissions Janet Rapelye said that Princeton, too, looks at non-cognitive factors, but hastened to add that her school will never stop searching for academic excellence because that, she said, is what the Princeton faculty wants. She went on to discuss the enormous increase that has already occurred and will

continue to occur in the number of international students at American universities. She noted that China's population is growing exponentially while ours is declining, a reason, she says, that is it important for students here to learn to work with others globally.

Over the next decade, Dean Rapelye predicted, diversity, tolerance for others and a concern for social justice will be of great importance to the admissions department at Princeton and other universities. And even as the number of American high school graduates stabilizes, the applicant pool for selective colleges will never decline to what it was several decades ago because so many of the applicants will come from populations that did not apply in such numbers back then.

What all this means for students from more privileged backgrounds

It remains to be seen how the projected changes in college admissions practices will impact more privileged students with access to expensive opportunities. The audience of counselors at the conference was skeptical that the application process will become less stressful for these students, as it seems likely that they will just have to demonstrate that they are qualified in even more ways. Everyone agreed, though, that high school students are better off pursuing a few genuine passions than spreading themselves thin in an effort to outdo their peers with the sheer number of their undertakings. Also, admissions officers would always rather admit kind and caring students than ones whose pursuit of their personal goals interferes with their concern for, treatment of, and ability to work well with others.