



Selectivity in the 2019 Admissions Cycle

The 2019 admissions cycle saw a continuation in the ever-declining admissions rates at many universities. Perhaps even more disconcerting was an increase in the number of applicants deferred and waitlisted at colleges and universities where their grades and test scores put them easily within the previous year's median and sometimes even above it. The explanation is largely that more students are applying to college in the U.S. even though the college-age population is not growing.

As colleges across the nation make a major effort to increase the racial and economic diversity of their student bodies, numerous non-profit organizations are helping students who will be the first in their families to attend college learn about a wide range of options and navigate the application process. Colleges that not so long ago were bastions of white elitism now proudly advertise the number students of color on campus and the number of Pell grant recipients they enroll. (To be eligible for a Pell grant, families must have an annual income below \$50,000, but most of the grants go to families earning \$20,000 or less.)

The admissions process at the most selective colleges appears increasingly random because anyplace that admits only a miniscule percentage of its applicants inevitably rejects a huge number that appear equally well qualified in every respect. This year the admit rate was in the low single digits not just for the Ivies and usual suspects like MIT, but also for schools that used to be a bit easier to get into like Vanderbilt and University of Chicago, both of which had a six percent admit rate this year.

When trying to figure out why schools admitted and rejected whom they did, we can speculate that perhaps some unknowable institutional priorities were at work. Maybe the schools needed more students with a particular academic or extracurricular interest, or maybe they just had too many applicants from a particular high school or region. (We've long known that New Jersey applicants have a disadvantage just because New Jersey has the highest rate of students going out of state for college.) Even so, admissions decisions this year frequently seemed particularly capricious as puzzled counselors shared stories of students who were

denied at schools they considered “targets,” but admitted to more highly selective ones.

Efforts to protect yield (the number of students who matriculate once admitted) undoubtedly explained some of this year’s more surprising admissions decisions. Aware that selectivity and yield figure into U.S. News and World Report’s rankings, some schools waitlisted students they must have suspected were not likely to attend because they would probably be admitted to and choose higher ranked schools. Even when that’s what ultimately happened, these decisions were initially upsetting to applicants who received them before receiving admission elsewhere.

U.S. News and World Report is said to be changing the formula they use to rank schools so selectivity and yield will no longer hold so much sway, and that is a good thing. However, enrollment managers will still need to worry about over-enrollment, which has been a problem in recent years at some schools that gained unprecedented popularity. For example, in 2018, the University of Texas in Austin, which aims to enroll 7,600 freshmen each year, had 8,900 of their admitted students enroll. After scrambling to create additional classes and find housing to accommodate them all, this year the school had to admit far fewer of their applicants. Furthermore, their mandate to admit the top 6% of graduates of Texas public high schools made it considerably more difficult for out-of-state applicants to gain admission.

As the average number of colleges students apply to increases, even colleges without constraints like UT’s are having a harder time figuring out how many they must accept in order to enroll a class the size they want. A vicious cycle is established as the unpredictability of the outcome incentivizes students to apply to more schools.

The good news is that American students have a great many very fine educational institutions to choose from. As students of the highest caliber are denied admission to what used to be the most selective schools, the ones they end up attending are in turn filling with outstanding students, becoming increasingly selective, and gaining prestige.

Also, people (and magazines) are beginning to recognize that outcomes should be the focus when evaluating a school more than the qualifications of the incoming freshman class. Who hires their graduates and what percentage of graduates get jobs in their field or are admitted into graduate or professional school within six months of graduation? This is the information prospective students should concern themselves with, and many colleges, not just the most prestigious ones, feature it in their printed materials because it is a source of pride.

These days real-world experiences like internships and mentored research are the key to most success after graduation, so when selecting a school, applicants should investigate opportunities for these experiences, which are available at a great many

colleges of all different types. And once on campus, students should avail themselves of the opportunities. Studies have shown that except for first generation college students, the school an individual attends is actually much less important to future success than what he or she does while there.