



Big Data Collection and the College Admissions Process

Applicants, beware –college admissions offices, who are consumed more than ever by desire to move their schools up in the rankings, are tracking you in all sorts of places. Here’s why: they want their applications to increase each year even when they have no intention of growing their freshman class, and at the same time, they want to maintain or increase their “yield,” the percentage of admitted students who choose to attend.

Some of the data collection has been around a long time. Ever wonder why you’re getting all that mail from schools you’ve never heard of? It’s because they buy data from all sorts of places including the College Board and ACTs, information you provided on optional questionnaires about your academic achievement and academic and extra-curricular interests as well as your test scores. The fact that they send you mail, even if it includes an application with a fee waiver, means nothing about the likelihood that they will admit you if you go ahead and apply. It means only that the school is striving to increase its applicant pool.

But it isn’t only when you fill out questionnaires that you provide data the colleges are using. In an effort to predict which applicants are most likely to attend if admitted, colleges are tracking all applicant communications with the school, who joins their Facebook page or tweets about their school, and even where on the FAFSA (application for financial aid) students have positioned their school.

It turns out that when students put a school at the top of their FAFSA list, they are more likely to attend. Pity the poor unknowing student who listed schools alphabetically or let his parents fill out the FAFSA without considering his wishes.

Enrollment managers frequently utilize elaborate formulas to code applicants’ presumed level of interest in a school. For instance, an applicant who initiated contact with the college by telephone or email to request information is deemed more likely to attend than one who entered the college’s data bank only after the local admissions officer gave a presentation at his

or her school and then asked all the students in attendance to fill out cards with their contact information.

For schools with rolling admissions, the timing of application submissions is analyzed. It comes as no surprise that early submissions are thought to reflect a high degree of interest. More surprising is the fact that late applications appear to be correlated with more serious intentions than applications that arrive in the middle of the pack.

So if you really like a school, go on the website, join the Facebook page, and visit it often. Some schools reputedly track the frequency of student clicks. They definitely follow what students are saying on social media about both their school and rival ones.