

Inquiring Minds— 26 April 2019

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Who Should Get In? Reforming College Admissions

Last month, the Varsity Blues admissions scandal broke with arrests of more than 50 people including parents, coaches, and test administrators charged with fraud for rigging the college admissions process in favor of children of the rich and famous.

While no college admissions officers were implicated, the scandal brought front and center the question of what standards should be used to determine college admissions.

Perhaps colleges should admit only the “best qualified.” But what does that mean? Highest test scores? Highest grade average? Most Advanced Placement classes? Rank in class? The amazing admissions essay? The outstanding debater? The science fair winner? What about the great 3-point shooter? The high schooler who broke the 4 minute mile?

What about under-served populations? Racial or geographic diversity? Can we have too many Asians?

What about the legacies, the student whose family has loyally supported a college for generations? Or the child of a big donor whose contribution might supply scholarships for other students? Should we just let the free market decide? Or have a lottery?

And, in an era when Americans are losing trust in most institutions, how might we restore trust in our college admissions process. Here are some suggestions. See also a **supplemental article**, written before the current scandal.

Kent Barnds, “To Reform Admissions, End Obsession With Prestige: It’s time to focus on the root cause of the scandal” *Inside Higher Education*
March 25, 2019

The past week has been pretty awful for college admissions professionals across the country. The so-called admissions scandal -- which by the way hasn’t implicated any admissions professionals -- has unleashed a barrage of criticism of the college admissions process.

The outrage is palatable and the calls for reform are loud and clear.

Among the ideas I heard or read are: eliminate the Common Application. Make college free. Make admissions a meritocracy again (as if it ever was). Introduce a lottery. Eliminate athletic “tips.” Consider grades only. Abandon the mythology of fit. Scrap standardized test scores. Eliminate legacy preferences. Hold out a certain number of spots for the traditionally underserved. Get rid of

essays, letters of recommendation and everything else but the transcript. Get rid of independent counselors. Eliminate early decision. Eliminate “demonstrated interest.” Offer greater transparency into the process. Require every college to be need blind. Eliminate any preference whatsoever.

You are welcome to add to the list. I am sure I missed a number of things.

Don't get me wrong, after 25-plus years in this business, I have seen enough to know there is room for improvement. But the college admissions process is nowhere near as broken as those calling for reform believe it is -- that is, unless we continue to believe college admissions in this country is defined exclusively by the practices, good and bad, of the super-selective, elite colleges, at which the privileged are perceived to be “stealing” seats of otherwise qualified candidates.

Let's get real about this scandal. It's not about college admissions at all. And while it may have more to do with elite colleges, it's not altogether about them, either.

This scandal is about a disgusting and unhealthy obsession with prestige when it comes to higher education in this country. And this obsession with prestige leads certain colleges and certain college admissions leaders, school counselors and families to do foolish things.

One of the great ironies of this whole affair is that many (not all) of those screaming loudest about reform seek reform in order to make the same set of super-elite colleges more accessible to deserving students.

As an admissions professional, I am ready for a serious discussion of reform in college admissions. But I sure hope that at the same time we also have a serious discussion about the scandalous obsession with prestige and the elites, which leads trustees, alumni, presidents, bond raters, administrations, faculty, students and parents to chase measures and pedigrees that are in no one student's interests.

I am not sure how to make reform happen. But I do know what will make it more likely.

- Reform is more likely when the media begins to focus on higher education as a whole and not just the Ivy League and R-1s.
- Reform is more likely when college night panels and case study evenings include someone from an open-access or moderately selective university, rather than panelists from only the elite.
- Reform is more likely when high schools stop publishing high school profiles that include the names of institutions to which their students were admitted.
- Reform is more likely when high schools stop promoting the astronomical amounts of scholarship dollars their graduates accumulate through all of their offers of admission.
- Reform is more likely when more information, rather than less, is available to an admissions office.
- Reform is more likely when the explosion of rankings -- paid and unpaid -- are discounted as the garbage they are.
- Reform is more likely when membership organizations don't defer to the loudest voices and worry about the elites walking away.

- Reform is more likely when an emphasis on from where a degree is earned does not immediately translate to some unrealistic perception of greatness.

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Reform is more likely when the chase to be admitted is less important than earning a degree. You may feel free to add to this list, too.

It's easy to call for reform and point the finger at admissions professionals at all colleges and universities across the nation as the culprits who created the conditions that led to this scandal. But there's more to it. And there is plenty of responsibility to go around. For all of those taking a look under the hood of the college admissions process, it might be time to recall that famous old Walt Kelly Pogo cartoon: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Bill Virgin, **"The college admissions scandal is tantalizing. Keeping higher ed open to many a must,"** March 13, 2019

Coaches, celebrities indicted in college admissions bribery case.

Court documents released Tuesdays shows dozens of celebrities and coaches have been charged with participating in a college admissions scam to get their children into prestigious schools.

For those of us who are connoisseurs of stories chronicling the misbehavior of the rich, famous and powerful, the past week's breaking news of the college admissions pay-to-play scandal has been highly entertaining.

To recap: Parents desperate to get their progeny into name schools resorted to such tactics as having the kids pose as athletes (with the collusion of coaches of teams the offspring wouldn't be playing for) or having someone take admission tests for them. To cheat their way in, the desperate parents were paying sums of money far in excess of what a diploma from a standard-issue, low-prestige, land-grant state university would cost.

Sex is about the only element this story is missing, and who knows, maybe that too will make an appearance at some point. We also don't have a local element — yet — unless you count the West Coast as local, and then a number of coaches at California schools have been implicated, including Stanford's sailing coach — sailing? It should be noted that none of the schools themselves are said to be involved in the schemes, just individual coaches who were paid to help game the admissions system.

Behind the chuckles and smirks are some less amusing aspects of the story, namely the mess we've made of the college-education system.

That's too bad, because higher ed has been, and continues to be, one of the successes of the American system. It's been a huge and powerful engine of economic prosperity for the American economy, at the individual and macro level. Reasonably priced college educations were a significant element in lifting millions into the middle class.

University research generated the new technologies that in turn produced new companies, industries and jobs. Never mind the occasional story of some outlandish survey or research project; pick up a publication summarizing the latest tech or medical research and prepare to be dazzled by the innovative ideas pouring out of institutions across the country. (Those economic contributions are why every time this column discusses long-term economic-development strategy for Tacoma, building and leveraging the region's higher-ed capacity is listed as a vital component.)

So if college works so well for so many, what's the problem?

Not one problem, actually, but many. College has gotten increasingly expensive. Americans have taken on headache-inducing levels of student-loan debt they cannot afford. Administrative staffs and budgets have become bloated. Big-time athletic programs further distort budgets as well as the purpose of universities. Higher ed is slow to adapt new ways of educating students. Too many students who don't fit in college feel they have to go anyway and that when they do, the name on the diploma is what really counts.

We won't get too starry-eyed about dear old Groves of Academia U. when compared to today's institutions of higher ed. The campuses of America are littered with buildings named after donors who contributed large sums to ensure that family members, no matter how thick-headed, got in. Nor is the brand-name aspect of shopping for a college degree anything new. The Ivies have had a head start of several hundred years to establish market position, begrudgingly making room for such recent upstarts as Stanford. College has long been pricey, and there have been plenty of occupations that didn't require a four-year degree but did lead to a middle-class life.

Much of that isn't going to change. But colleges do need to change if they're going to continue to be contributors to American prosperity. That won't require them to lower standards or be even more elitist. It will require them to adapt to realities in technology, demographics, the job market and students' ability to pay.

Higher ed is experimenting and attempting to innovate, albeit tentatively, with much of that coming from a long overlooked segment, the community, two-year and vocational-technical schools. With no ivied legacies to protect and no fat-cat donors buying their way in, that slice of higher ed has been freer to restructure itself.

One way they've been doing so is by adding four-year bachelor's degree programs. At its February meeting the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges approved four more applied bachelor's degree programs, including cybersecurity at Clark College, interior design at Clover Park Technical College, integrated design at Highline College and applied business management at Pierce College. Another 12 such programs are being reviewed. In the 2017-2018 school year, 3,960 students were enrolled in applied bachelor's programs in Washington's community colleges.

The four-year schools, public and private, have their own initiatives. Pacific Lutheran University recently announced the introduction of an innovation studies minor, to give students the tools to transform ideas into entrepreneurial ventures. The University of Washington Tacoma wants the Legislature to approve expansion, in faculty, facilities and programs, of its engineering education. The dirty secret of college education is that you can with the right faculty, programs, courses, and fellow students, not to mention your own drive and competence, put together a more than serviceable college education that doesn't cost several lifetimes' worth of savings but which does open avenues to building that sort of wealth.

The college education that most people wind up with need not be prestigious enough to attract graft and bribery. For the economy to continue to thrive, however, those schools and the system as a whole need to be good enough that students and society see value in the time and money they've invested in it.

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