

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 303

HE 033 057

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TITLE Admission Policies and Practices in U.S. Colleges and Universities.  
INSTITUTION Georgia Univ., Athens. Inst. of Higher Education.  
PUB DATE 1992-09-00  
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Association for Educational Assessment (18th, Dublin, Ireland, September 14-18, 1992).  
AVAILABLE FROM Institute of Higher Education, Candler Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-1772; Tel: 706-542-3464.  
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; \*Admission Criteria; \*College Admission; College Bound Students; College School Cooperation; Educational Change; Educational History; Educational Trends; Higher Education; School Policy; Standardized Tests  
IDENTIFIERS Reform Efforts

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines admission policies and practices in U.S. colleges and universities, examining practices from colonial and ante-bellum colleges to advances made beginning in 1870, when entrance requirements were influenced by the transformation of colleges into universities. These 19th century changes were the forerunner of waves of reform in the 20th century, during which school/college relations, the use of standardized tests, uniform curricula, flexibility in dealing with pluralistic groups of students, and diversity of academic programs and courses were the focus of debate. Embedded in admission policies and practices in the 1990s are many of the social, economic, political, and cultural consequences of three decades of rapid change; recruitment, selection, and admission to U.S. institutions is energetic and aggressive; and viewed from an international perspective, there is the increasing recognition that universities are institutions that belong to the international community. Distinctive features of modern practice include professionalization of staff functions and the diffusion of policy and decision making. The academic standards and criteria that dominate admission decisions and choices continue to be secondary school preparation and standardized tests. The study concludes, however, that at a time when school and college relations are undergoing rapid change, that admission policies and practices must once again be reconsidered. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

# ADMISSION POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN U.S. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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**This paper was presented at the 18th Annual Conference of the International Association for Educational Assessment at St. Patrick's College in Dublin, Ireland on September 14-18, 1992.**

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## ADMISSION POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN U.S. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

In 1903 Edwin Cornelius Broome wrote a doctoral dissertation entitled, "A Historical and Critical Discussion of College Admission Requirements." Because of its continuing relevance to college admissions, Broome's dissertation was reprinted in 1963 by the College Entrance Examinations Board. Now, almost thirty years after it was reprinted and over one hundred years since Broome began his study of college admissions, his dissertation remains a fascinating introduction to admission policies and practices in U.S. institutions of higher learning.

Following his remarkable discussion of admission practices in colonial and ante-bellum colleges, Broome gave a summary of the advances that had been made since 1870. Changes in entrance requirements were influenced, most of all, by the gradual transformation of colleges into universities and by the popular demand for advanced studies in public high schools (institutions that Broome referred to as "the people's college"). By 1900 many new subjects were present in college entrance requirements. English, mathematics, history, and science had advanced considerably and increasingly important in admission procedures were: (1) English composition, (2) the solution of original problems in geometry, (3) independent experimental work in science, and (4) coursework involving the actual use of a foreign language. Some colleges still required Latin and Greek but they required higher standards and a broader exposure to the classics on which students were examined. Each of these interesting changes implied that examinations were becoming "tests of power rather than the mere acquisition of facts."

Broome did not doubt that he had witnessed a "revolution in educational principles and practices." The aim of education had become (or was becoming) the development of individual students and their preparation for life in its fullest, most comprehensive sense. The most important problem, in his estimation, was the need for closer articulation between school and college. Good progress had been made toward uniformity in school curricula but that uniformity was impeded by the dualistic objectives of high

schools. Not only were schools trying to prepare more students for college, they were trying to prepare other students for life in the world of work. To school leaders the two objectives were mutually exclusive; to Broome, the preparation of students for college should be the best way of preparing them for the world of work.

The conditions for an ideal connection between high schools and colleges are specified by Broome as: (1) a fair degree of flexibility in both high school curricula and in college admission requirements, (2) a reasonable degree of uniformity in high school standards and in college requirements for admission, and (3) adequate and fair tests of the student's intellectual, moral, and physical fitness to begin college. Flexibility was not a cause for alarm, but (to Broome) high school curricula may go too far in their effort to be more flexible. Uniformity was increasing, but for high schools the move for uniform standards was mostly local or sectional; for colleges the quest for uniform admission requirements was national.

As for adequate and fair tests, there was a great diversity of opinion and practice. When tests were administered by local school teachers, standards were lowered by "the eagerness of high-school principals to make a good showing" (p. 151). And among students, standards were lowered by "the deplorable desire . . . to evade all thorough tests of accurate scholarship and of acquired mental power" (p. 150). Broome quietly pleads for "Admission to college by examination, these to be thorough, fair, uniform, and judiciously administered by a board of national recognition" (p. 152).

In many respects Broome's survey of the 19th century was a forerunner of much that has happened in the 20th century. Admission policies and requirements have continued to be an on-and-off concern for uniform curricula across the nation's diverse high schools, consistency and flexibility in the application of college admission requirements, and for academic standards while opening classrooms to new students who vary significantly in scholastic achievement, abilities, and interests. In retrospect at least five different waves of reform can be seen. Each wave included public debates about school/college relations, the use of standardized tests, uniform curricula, and a search for flexibility in dealing with pluralistic groups of students and the diversity of academic programs and courses:

1. The first wave of reform reflected an intensive concern with school and college relations as the 20th century opened. High schools were under great pressure to establish uniform curricula, to shake free of the tight grasp of the classical languages, and to provide instruction in English and modern foreign languages instead of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. One mark of success in this first effort to reform the public schools was the establishment of the College Entrance Examination Board as a means of facilitating access to college for students who had previously been at the mercy of idiosyncratic college admission requirements.
2. The second wave included a subsequent concern with diversification of curricula and a loosening of college admission requirements. The villain in this plot was a rigid high school curriculum of English, mathematics, foreign languages, science, and history that did not meet the needs of students who would not attend college. The Progressive Education Association's Eight-Year Study proved to the satisfaction of many educators that good students could succeed in college irrespective of what they studied in high school. The advent of WWII prevented, no doubt, the Eight-Year Study from having greater impact on American schooling.
3. In the third wave following WWII, college admission standards and the purposes of education were the subjects of intensive consideration. The GI Bill was instrumental in what has proved to be a continuing revolution in educational thought and discussion. President Harry S. Truman's Commission on Higher Education stated unequivocally that students with average intelligence should be able to benefit from one or two years of education beyond the high school. Incumbent upon colleges and universities was "a much larger role in the national life." High schools accepted the challenge of educating some students for higher or advanced learning and other students for employment and citizenship.

#### *4 / Admission Policies & Practices*

4. The post-sputnik era, the fourth wave, moved the post-WWII baby boomers through high school and onto college campuses. This era produced an extraordinary effort to reform school and college curricula, to meet the changing demands and expectations of enormous numbers of students, and to cope with an unprecedented challenge to provide both excellence and equality in educational opportunities. Some observers believe that it took the decade of the 1970s to ride out the shock waves that came with and/or produced the need for reform in American education.
  
5. In 1983 the fifth wave of reform was launched by a dozen or more commission reports that address the plight of public schooling and called for active national leadership in reforming secondary education while there was still time. In each of these reports are major recommendations pertaining to: (1) more explicit requirements for high school graduation that are educationally relevant; (2) admission policies that are definite about required or preferred pre-college curricula; and (3) admission standards and academic criteria that are creditable and fair. In all such reports there is a sense of urgency about the cooperation of schools and colleges in providing graduates with basic academic competencies; adequate foundations in science, mathematics, and other fields of disciplined inquiry; and literacy in the nation's history, its traditions, and its general culture.

#### **An International Context**

Admission policies in the U.S. have been influenced strongly by the series of tumultuous events that began in the 1950s and continued until the mid-1970s. The "impending tidal wave" (of students born in the post-WWII era) is but one of the graphic terms that depicted the decade of the 1960s. In 1964 the first of the baby-boomers (born in 1946) enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities — and higher education has never been the same.

The increased demand for higher education was documented internationally in 1963 with the publication of a study conducted jointly by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Association of



Universities (IAU). The study, directed by the president of the College Board (Frank Bowles), was conducted at a time when education throughout the world was reacting to unprecedented population growth, technology and specialization, an explosion of knowledge, a "revolution of rising expectations," the democratization of education, and the growing interdependence of nations.

When viewed from an international perspective, the problems of college admissions were undoubtedly related to political, economic, and social forces at play in the post-WWII world. Among the requirements for successful solutions were: (a) expanding and enriching institutional facilities at national levels and through international cooperation; (b) diversifying further the curricular offerings of secondary and higher education; (c) easing the pressures on traditional forms of education while maintaining standards of quality; and (d) serving the public interest by cultivating individual capacities for different economic, social, and intellectual opportunities and needs.

Running throughout the study is the conviction that "every effort toward the discovery and the cultivation of human talent" (p.15) should be made. The demand for education at all levels had risen to "unprecedented heights" and the nations of the world had made a varying response to their particular educational needs. Educational facilities had been expanded at primary, secondary, and higher levels but no level of education had kept pace with the increased demand. With the expansion of facilities, there was a need for added programs that would serve students from many diverse social origins. In many nations universal education was required at the elementary level, as well as the provision of secondary facilities to take in as large a proportion as possible of those who finish elementary education. For higher education the implication was quite direct; "We must select those who show promise of being able to meet the intellectual challenge of higher education" (p. 15). And perhaps not so apparent to many readers, "generous financial assistance for needy students" should be an investment in mankind, avoiding thereby the tragedy of uneducated individuals and the social crime of wasting human talent.

Implicit in the assumptions, working premises, and findings of the study is an increasing recognition that universities are universal institutions that belong to the international community. A similar



perspective is explicit in later studies that have addressed school and college relations (Clark, 1985). Despite the great divergence that can be observed in the purposes and functions of secondary schools and universities, each influences the other in many subtle and complex ways. Schools continue to educate students for advanced or specialized learning at the university level, and universities continue to supply the principals, teachers, counselors, and coaches who influence students in their choice of postsecondary or higher education. In schools and colleges seeking to educate students for participation in international communities, the lack of uniformity in school and college curricular and the inflexibility of college admission requirements continue to be major problems in school and college relations.

### **Admission Policies and Functions**

Admission policies and practices in the 1990s reflect the many changes that have taken place in American higher education since the 1960s. Embedded in the policies are social, economic, political, and cultural consequences that followed from three decades of rapid change and various efforts to experiment with new functions and procedures. Thus the admissions process in U.S. colleges and universities is far more involved now than in 1963 when Frank Bowles described the process as "the series of selections to which students are subjected by their country's educational system through the entire period in which they mature to the age of entrance." Indeed the process is now an elaborate series of choices and decisions that involve many admission specialists, such as counselors, advisers, and assistant directors. As a result, the distinctive features of the overall process may be: (1) the professionalization of staff functions and the varied responsibilities of numerous staff specialists, and (2) the diffusion of policy and decision making at different levels of academic governance and the involvement of policy makers far removed from college classrooms.

The arrival of the "admissions officer" as a staff specialist was quite evident in the early 1960s. As statewide systems of public higher education adopted systemwide requirements for entry to their various units, the responsibilities of directors of admissions expanded accordingly. And as prestigious universities found themselves with

far more applicants than classroom seats or dormitory beds, selective admissions became a provisional solution to educational problems that called for specialized or technical skills. In turn, the admissions process was increasingly directed by a specialist for whom admissions was his or her only responsibility. To give the position a title more in keeping with its academic duties, many directors became "deans of admissions."

Selective admissions, one means of coping with increasing demands, was quickly seized as an opportunity to admit better prepared students. For most universities this meant high school averages and entrance examination scores that were appreciably higher than those recorded for students previously admitted. The outcome of many such efforts was an almost obsessive concern with multiple regression equations that combine high school averages and entrance examination scores to give the best prediction of academic performance. To improve the precision and accuracy of prediction, many institutions were captivated by freshmen grade point averages as the most useful single index of achievement at the college level. Admission decisions thereby became a matter of selecting students on the basis of predicted performance.

Other institutions, seeking to reduce drop-out and failure rates, turned to personal interviews as a means of assessing the interests, attitudes, and motives of applicants. As a national survey (Hauser and Lazarsfeld, 1963) indicated, 12 percent of the responding officials regarded personal interviews as the single most important factor in admission decisions. Another 51 percent believed personal interviews to be an important factor in admission, leaving less than a third of the respondents who were dubious about the merits of interviews. The gist of Hauser and Lazarsfeld's study, nonetheless, is the emergence of a professional staff with considerable authority in admission decisions.

Since the 1960s numerous changes in federal regulations, state laws, governing board policies, and public expectations have altered the decision making authority and responsibilities of admission officers. A study conducted by the College Board and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO, 1980) implies that admission officials are primarily responsible for specific admission policies in almost half (48%) of the nation's institutions, but admission committees have such

## *8 / Admission Policies & Practices*

responsibilities in more than a third (35%) of the institutions surveyed. General policy, in the form of broad guidelines, is the primary responsibility of presidents (40%), governing boards (31%), state legislatures (13%), coordinating boards (8%), executive councils (25%), and faculty senates (12%) in other institutions. The diffusion of policy decisions reflects, no doubt, the political, legal, and economic struggles of U.S. institutions over the past thirty years. Significant variations are observed in public and private colleges, and in two-year and four-year colleges. It is significant, therefore, that general admission policies are more likely to be decided by admission committees in private, four-year colleges (53%). Governing boards are more likely to control policy in public, four-year colleges (42%), and the influence of state legislatures is quite visible in public, two-year colleges (33%).

In 1992 the recruitment, selection, and admission of U.S. college students can be described as energetic and aggressive. The posture of many universities and colleges is competitive, to say the least, and relatively effective, to say the obvious. Despite many gloomy predictions of enrollment decline since the early 1970s, national enrollment patterns reveal no precipitous declines in the number of applicants and candidates seeking admission to the nation's prestigious research universities and liberal arts colleges, to the state universities and land grant institutions that educate the great majority of U.S. colleges students, or to the various community and/or technical colleges that offer short-term, career-related educational opportunities. Where enrollments have declined, the cause can usually be identified as a deplorable economy, a lessening demand for certain kinds of educational experiences, and/or the attraction of other kinds of educational advantages and benefits.

In institutions where full-time, traditional college-age (18-24 years) male students are missing, their classroom seats have often been filled by other students. Adult learners (over 25 years of age), women students (in traditionally male fields of study), minority students (identified by race or ethnic group), educationally disadvantaged students (economically, socially, or culturally), handicapped students (especially those who are physically impaired), and students with special talents (art, music, drama, athletics) have participated in higher education at a higher rate as traditional college-age students have declined in relative numbers. In certain fields of

study such as engineering, the increase in foreign students is quite noticeable. And with the innumerable and highly variable efforts of many institutions to establish extension centers, inservice programs, and other forms of offcampus instruction, part-time, working and/or offcampus enrollees have replaced full-time, oncampus students.

### **Requirements and Procedures**

The AACRAO/CEEB survey of admission practices and procedures in 1980 suggests a relatively stable pattern for the nation's two-year and four-year, public and private institutions of higher education. Admission requirements were reported to be "about the same" in 1978 as they were in 1970, and responding admission officials did not anticipate significant changes through the mid-1980s. The kinds of factual data and information required by the 3,500 colleges and universities varies greatly according to institutional mission, programs, services, organized activities, and type of control. To be considered for admission, most applicants are required to submit transcripts of their high school records, entrance examination scores, and one or more letters of recommendation. Other kinds of information that may be required are achievement test scores, personal essays or biographies, portfolios or other evidence of productivity, physical health statements, and other kinds of data that can be reported through questionnaires or checksheets. The uses of such information vary as greatly as the kinds of information gathered.

When specific requirements are made in high school subjects, the requirements usually pertain to units or credits earned and not to the grades earned in specific classes. A typical pattern of requirements is seen in four years of English, two years or less of mathematics, one year or more of physical science, one year at most of biological science, and two years at most of a foreign language. For many candidates, two years of social science may be specified but the substance of this requirement is not always clear. Over a fourth (26%) of the responding officials regard the pattern of high school subjects as very important; for private, four-year colleges the corresponding figure is 38 percent. Almost a third (30%) of the responding institutions do not consider the pattern of high school subjects in

admission decisions, and at least 9 percent believe such patterns to be a minor factor.

A significant development in college admissions is the requirement of a college preparatory curriculum by statewide governing boards. In Georgia, for example, where all 34 institutions of public higher education are responsible to a single governing board, a specified number of high school courses are required in English (4), science (3), mathematics (3), social science (3), and foreign language (2). Additional courses that are strongly recommended to high school students include computer technology, fine arts, and a third course in a foreign language. Each institution in the University System is authorized to require higher standards for admissions, and provisional admission policies have been approved for applicants from schools in which all requirements could not be met.

When high school grades and test scores are specified, they are likely to be minimum requirements which must be counterbalanced by other, more positive information on the qualifications of candidates. For examples, the average minimum high school average (HSA) of 2.0 (on a four-point scale) is specified by 43 percent of the responding public, four-year institutions and by 58 percent of the private, four-year institutions. An average minimum score of 740 (combined) for the SAT is specified by 39 percent of the public, four-year colleges and 750 is required by the private, four-year institutions. Comparable scores for the ACT are 16.2 for 30 percent of the public, four-year colleges and 16.4 for 36 percent of the private, four-year colleges.

The requirement of personal essays has increased significantly since the 1970s. As a sample, personal essays are of value in judging writing skills, and as a source of other information concerning personal qualities, they can often provide insights that are otherwise difficult to obtain. Relatively few (7%) of the respondents in the AACRAO/CEEB survey, however, regarded personal essays as very important. Much the same response was given to the importance of portfolios. Thirty percent of the respondents from private, four-year institutions, however, regarded portfolios as one of several factors that would be considered in making admission decisions.

In brief, the findings of the AACRAO/CEEB survey suggest great variation in admission requirements and procedures when they are considered for public and private, two-year and four-year institutions. The extent to which requirements vary is one of several



reasons to believe that a lack of uniformity is in the public interests. The flexibility that is maintained in requirements may be lost, however, in the rigidity of admission procedures for many colleges. The pressures of annual cycles in recruitment, selection, admission, and enrollment are unlikely to permit a leisurely pace for reluctant applicants.

### **Standards and Criteria**

The academic standards and criteria that dominate admission decisions and choices continue to be secondary preparation and standardized tests of academic ability. High school averages or rank in class are often used as a simplified measure of secondary preparation and are the most frequently used criterion of high school performance. The SAT and ACT continue to be the most frequently used measures of verbal and mathematical abilities, educational achievement, and academic promise at the college level. The academic standards that are employed in selective admissions are obscured by the lengthy process of recruitment, application, screening, selection, and acceptance. High school records and entrance examination scores are reduced to statistical indices that have acquired their own distinctive features. Some, like SAT scores and high school averages (or rank in class), have been reified (or personified) because they are so widely accepted as the reasons why individual students are accepted or rejected by various colleges. It is both significant and alarming, therefore, that admission officials did not perceive extensive or pervasive change in admission practices during the decade of the 1970s. Well over half (61%) of the responding officials saw no significant change in the importance of high school achievement as a criterion for use in admission decisions. Almost a third (31%) of the responding institutions regard the high school grade average (or class rank) as the single most important factor in making admission decisions. Where selective admission is more important, over four out of ten public four-year colleges (43%) and almost four out of ten private four-year colleges (39%) regard grade averages or class rank as the more important single factor.

Very few (2%) of the responding institutions regard the SAT, ACT, or PSAT/NMSQT as the single most important factor to consider

in admission decisions. Over four out of ten (42%) regard such standardized tests as a very important factor, and the high regard for test scores apparently increases when public four-year colleges (59%) and private four-year colleges (54%) are the respondents.

The uses of academic standards and criteria in college admissions give neither an encouraging nor disappointing picture of higher education in the 1990s. The findings of research give no credence to the opinions of critics (and the news media) who oppose the use of standardized tests in admission decisions. The high school average (or class rank) continues to be the best single predictor of college grades, but SAT scores continue to make a significant contribution to predictive efficiency in many colleges where the incremental validity of the SAT should be appreciated. Colleges dropping the SAT as an admission requirement will be praised in the news media, but editorial praise is but another indication of the controversy that has plagued testing, measurement, evaluation, and assessment for the past four decades.

Systematic and objective research has consistently demonstrated the incremental and differential usefulness of SAT scores in predicting freshmen grade point averages (Willingham et al., 1990). No one listens, however, when friendly critics point out that prediction is the least of satisfactory solutions to educational problems. And no one bothers to ask about the significance and meaning of grade point averages as an academic standard or criterion. Very few colleges make admission decisions on the basis of predicted performance. And no institution with a competent director of admissions will reject applicants solely on the basis of their SAT scores. Much to the contrary, two out of three (65%) AACRAO/CEEB survey respondents say that no predicted grade point average is computed at their institution, and well over half (57%) have never conducted a validity study involving entrance examinations.

Among the minor tragedies of higher education is the consistency with which many administrative officials and faculty members use SAT (combined) scores, high school averages, and freshmen grade point averages as absolute measures of ability and achievement. All three indices have merits that are relative to administrative, academic, and admission decisions but none of the three is a standard that can stand as an absolute. In other words, educators — like the general public and the news media — often confuse criteria



(SAT-V, SAT-M, HSA, and GPA) with standards of achievement, ability, or accomplishment that they have not bothered to define and which they can not possibly defend.

As long as unusually high SAT scores are applauded by presidents, deans, and admission directors as a special accomplishment (and low scores cited as evidence of intellectual disability), critics should be less concerned about the predictability of grades from SAT scores and high school averages. And as long as honor graduates are selected on the basis of grade point averages computed to the fourth decimal place, public leaders should worry less about grade inflation or the erosion of academic standards. The target of worry and concern should be the inability of educators to define academic standards that are more directly related to teaching and learning — and to specify adequate criterion whereby the informed public can recognize when academic standards have been met.

### Conclusions and Implications

In summary, admission policies and practices must again be considered at a time when school and college relations are undergoing rapid change. Another "era of commission reports" has spurred a national interest in the assessment of educational outcomes as the most suitable way of meeting accreditation requirements and public demands for accountability. Public attention and concern are turning to national standards as one means of ensuring more uniformity in high school curricula and a higher standard of performance for graduating seniors. Organized interest groups, litigants in federal and state courts, and faculty dissidents embrace a specious ideology of multiculturalism to ensure flexibility in all matters pertaining to gender and minority group membership. Efforts to revise the SAT suggest that we are still searching for entrance examinations that are adequate and fair. In all such efforts, admission policies, standards, and criteria are expected to meet public expectations of uniformity, flexibility, and fairness without sacrificing academic quality or excellence. In other words, significant and enduring progress has been made in the admission policies and practices of U.S. colleges and universities, but they are still coping with conditions of flexibility, uniformity, and adequacy that Broome identified in 1903.

Later generations of policy and decision makers, from the perspective a new century will provide, will wonder why there was so little public accord about the purposes of education in the 1990s. They will understand why college admissions continued to be a crucial stage of transition in the lives of young adults, but they will wonder about the inability of schools and colleges to speak a common language and to define acceptable standards and criteria that met public expectations. They will be perplexed about the great distance we traveled in the 20th century without making better progress in education. Some of them will be astounded that we were still seeking a fair degree of flexibility in high school curricula and college admission requirements, a reasonable degree of uniformity in high school standards, and adequate and fair tests of the student's intellectual, moral, and physical fitness for higher education.

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**16 / Admission Policies & Practices**

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