The
College
Board

BEST PRACTICES IN ADMISSIONS DECISIONS

A REPORT ON THE THIRD COLLEGE BOARD CONFERENCE ON ADMISSION MODELS

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FOREWORD

This document summarizes the discussions that occurred during the third conference on admissions models on August 23–24, 2001, in Vancouver, Canada. Although the College Board convened the meeting and is publishing these proceedings, the document that follows reflects the collective views of the experienced admissions professionals and researchers who participated in the meeting.

Special thanks go to Jerry Lucido, associate provost and director of admissions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who ably served as chair and who managed to let the discussion go where the participants wanted while at the same time maintaining order and the general schedule. Catherine Meredith, assistant director, SAT® Program, prepared the transcript of the meeting on which this document was based. During the College Board's National Forum in Denver in October 2001, Jerry Lucido moderated and participated in a standing-room only session about the conference. The other participants in that panel were Greg Perfetto, assistant provost and director of special projects, Vanderbilt University, Nancy Hargrave Meislahn, dean of admissions and financial aid, Wesleyan University, and Sue Wilbur, director, admissions and relations with schools, University of California, Irvine. Sections of this document were based on the summaries they presented at that meeting. Thus, this monograph has many authors, but all participants contributed in significant ways.

Finally, I should note that this document does not represent a blueprint about best practices in admissions decision making. Rather, it is intended to present a framework for further discussions and elaborations. Educators and others who would like to join in the discussion are invited to send in comments. Individuals who would like to participate in future events on these topics are also invited to let us know of their interests.

These are challenging times for everyone involved in the college admissions process. We hope this monograph will help inform the discussions that are taking place on campuses and elsewhere.

Gretchen W. Rigol
Vice President

INTRODUCTION

This monograph builds on the work of the first two College Board conferences on admissions models, which culminated in the 1999 publication of *Toward a Taxonomy of the Admissions Decision-Making Process*[1]. The *Taxonomy* provides a framework for describing the core features of the admissions decision-making process. It applies to virtually every type of institution that has to make decisions about who will and who will not be offered a place in that college or university. Even open-door institutions generally have minimum requirements based on some general understanding of who is eligible for further education. Thus, this work is not focused solely on what the general public often refers to as "selective institutions" (the relatively small number of institutions that reject large numbers of applicants), but rather all institutions that engage in any type of decision making about who may enroll.

During those earlier conferences, four philosophical perspectives were identified:

Eligibility Based Models

Entitlement
- *Higher education is an inalienable right and should be made available to everyone.*

Open Access
- *College is a natural progression after high school and should be made available to everyone who is qualified.*

Performance Based Models

Meritocracy
- *Access to higher education is a reward for those who have been most academically successful.*

Character
- *Access to higher education is a reward for personal virtue, dedication, perseverance, community service, and hard work.*

Student Capacity to Benefit Models

Enhancement
- *The goal of higher education is to seek out and nurture talent.*

Mobilization
- *Higher education is the great equalizer and must promote social and economic mobility.*

Student Capacity to Contribute Models

Investment
- *Access to higher education should promote the greater good and further the development of society.*

Environmental/Institutional
- *The admissions selection process is designed to meet the enrollment goals and unique organizational needs of the admitting institution, while promoting the overall quality of students' educational experience.*

Fiduciary
- *Higher education is a business, and access must first preserve the institution's fiscal integrity.*

The first group of models evaluates potential students against external criteria rather than comparing and making judgments among applicants. The **entitlement** version essentially guarantees admission to everyone and is exemplified by some programs in community colleges that are truly open door. (It should be noted that many programs at community colleges have limited capacity and apply some type of selection model in determining how seats are allocated.) A slightly more restrictive version of the eligibility perspective is called **open access**, which typically requires some minimum standard, such as a minimum GPA or a certain score on an external examination or a combination of such factors. Many state colleges base their admissions on such a perspective; students and counselors can tell from reading the requirements whether or not the student will be admitted.

Eligibility-based models generally presume flexible capacity. Whenever the number of students exceeds an institution's ability to expand (or during times of contraction), the minimum criteria must be adjusted or another admissions model must be adopted. The history of higher education is full of examples of open-door institutions that had to adopt higher and higher GPA, coursework, and test score requirements as a way to manage enrollments. There are also statewide systems and institutions that first filter students based on an eligibility criteria and then apply a competitive selection process.

The performance-based models, although related to the basic concept of eligibility, compare one student to another and are closest to what we typically imagine when we talk about selective admissions—particularly the **meritocracy** approach, which views access to higher education as a reward for successfully demonstrating prior success in academic pursuits. The **character** approach goes a step further and looks beyond academics to personal characteristics such as hard work and good citizenship. Part of the difficulty of explaining how admissions decisions are made is that while these performance-based models are the basis for most competitive selection models, they are not based on external and fixed eligibility standards. The student with high grades, excellent test results, and a rigorous college-prep curriculum who has demonstrated

the highest levels of personal virtue is not guaranteed admission under this model. An evaluation of one student's merit and character is compared with evaluations of other students, and the resulting decisions cannot be forecast in isolation.

While most selective institutions incorporate a performance-based component in their selection processes, many that take a comprehensive or holistic approach to selection also use additional perspectives in their decision making. A clear secondary focus for many institutions is a student's ability to benefit from higher education. The **enhancement** model attempts to identify talent which can be nurtured and developed by the institution. The **mobilization** approach is intended to promote social and economic mobility. In both of these approaches, previous accomplishments are viewed in the context of the student's previous opportunities, and the student's unrealized potential is a positive attribute.

The final philosophical model relates to what the potential student might contribute to the institution or society. A basic distinction was made between approaches in which capacity to contribute was immediate and the direct result of the student's enrollment and those in which the benefits were long term and extended beyond the institution. The **investment** approach describes this longer-term benefit to the greater society. Institutions occasionally make admissions decisions based partially on more narrowly focused immediate institutional needs. These **environmental/institutional** considerations reflect academic needs, extracurricular needs, or meeting social goals—such as enrolling a diverse student body. The **fiduciary** approach recognizes the reality of economics and that admissions decisions that take into account a students' ability to pay is simply a fact of life for many institutions.

Although these philosophical models can be neatly outlined and described as independent approaches, they are not mutually exclusive. Few real-world admissions operations would neatly fit in any one category. And, as discussion focuses more on holistic decision making, it becomes clear that by its very nature this comprehensive approach involves a complex integration of many different and sometimes competing philosophical models for selecting students.

The College Board initiated the admissions models project in part to develop a common language to describe how admissions is practiced by different institutions, but also to explore ways that the admissions decision-making process can be improved. As it has evolved, the project has become a forum for a dialogue on the future of admissions and the changes that are needed to respond to and reflect the current environment.

Virtually all levels and types of education in America are facing the challenges of rapidly changing demographics, including increased immigration, large populations whose first language is not English, and first-generation college students. Another common pressure felt throughout the educational system is the growth rate among traditional age students. And for the higher education sector, this growth is compounded by increasing interest among adults for further education.

Coupled with increased demand is the uneven quality of secondary education. As institutions of higher education seek to serve increasing numbers of students, they are faced with the reality that many of these students are underprepared and that many of the underprepared students come from racial or ethnic groups that have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education. It is not surprising in such an environment that there is heightened public interest in admissions, which increasingly takes form in legal and political challenges. Never before in its history has admission to American colleges and universities been subjected to such intense scrutiny.

Some of the most pressing challenges facing the admissions process are primarily internal and need to be addressed within the context of the institution's overall mission. For example:

- *How can institutions identify a decision-making model that will support and be fair to all students within a more diverse applicant pool?*
- *How can large institutions with limited resources implement a holistic comprehensive review of all applicants?*
- *What can institutions do to support and retain a growing enrollment of first-generation college students?*
- *How can the admissions office effectively involve faculty and the administration in developing and implementing admissions processes that reflect and support the institutional mission?*

At the same time, there are major external challenges facing the admissions profession:

- *How can institutions communicate with their various publics (students, parents, counselors, legislators, etc.) about how admissions works at selective institutions?*
- *What can institutions do to differentiate their admissions policies as clearly as they can describe their unique missions?*

- *How can the concept of holistic or comprehensive admissions be explained in the context of public accountability?*
- *What can be done to educate the public that quantifiable measures (such as GPA and test results) are not all important and are not the only factors that matter in admissions?*

COMPONENTS OF A BEST PRACTICES ADMISSIONS MODEL

Conference participants agreed unanimously that admissions decisions should be made in the broader context of each institution's mission, goals, objectives, and priorities. At the same time, it was noted that the day-to-day reality is more dynamic and not easily predicted and that admissions models need to be flexible to account for unanticipated environmental conditions. In addition, as described below in the section on the Structure of Admissions Power, authority for admissions varies widely across institutions.

Despite these qualifications, the following five-step schematic was discussed as a useful internal guide for an institutional self-audit or review of the admissions process. The two key elements of this process are (1) that it builds on a broad-based consensus and (2) that it is flexible and subject to evaluation, review, and revision.

Institutional Priority Statement

1. A widely agreed upon (consensus) and clearly defined statement of institutional goals, objectives, and priorities. This statement should be more specific than the institution's mission statement, but still general enough to allow latitude in timing and implementation. The statement should have the support of the institution at the highest administrative levels and should lay out both the goals of the admission process and the various competing priorities. The statement should recognize the tradeoffs that exist between various goals (e.g., increase quality, limit growth of financial aid) and should provide guidance for making decisions.

Strategic Plan

2. A strategic plan that identifies the resources that will be devoted to various goals identified in the institutional priority statement, the anticipated effects on the student body, and a timetable for implementation that is sensitive to the tradeoffs between various priorities. The strategic plan is basically a guideline for making decisions on resource allocation and for defining the **WHAT and WHEN** parameters by which progress and success will be measured. This plan should be periodically updated based on the assessment and feedback mechanisms described below.

Implementation Plan

3. An implementation plan that delineates the steps that will be taken to achieve the desired results. This is the actual "admission decision-making step" and should define in concrete terms **HOW** prospective students are recruited and what criteria will be applied in the admitting process. The implementation plan consists of two components. The first component is class-building programs such as new or modified publications, targeting strategies, communications flow and various marketing efforts. The second component is a concrete description of what factors are considered in the admitting process, and **HOW** the various factors are combined and contrasted when arriving at an admissions decision.

Empirical Evaluation Plan

4. An empirical evaluation plan for evaluating each of the procedures outlined in step 3—both in terms of their immediate impact and also in terms of their relationship to the overall strategic plan outlined in step 2. The evaluation component should provide clear metrics and

feedback that identify the extent to which individual goals are being met both in absolute terms as well as in terms of the timetable implementation schedule.

Realignment Process

5. A realignment process which utilizes the empirical evaluation and feedback from step 4 to revise the strategic plan. This step completes the ongoing best-practices circle by starting the whole process over with revision of the strategic plan, which in turn leads to a revision of the implementation plan and a new evaluation plan.

Traditionally, validity studies of the admissions process use a cumulative GPA as the criterion—in part because it is quantified and convenient, but also because it represents the judgment of different faculty about a student's academic work in different courses. But among stakeholders, there are a variety of definitions of success.

Although most institutions would agree that measures of academic accomplishment are central to their educational mission, there are many other possible desired outcomes of a college education. The Personal Qualities research[2] conducted during the 1980s focused on four areas of achievement:

1) *Scholarship (college GPA and departmental honors).*
2) *Leadership (both elected and appointed positions).*
3) *Significant Accomplishments (scientific, artistic, athletic, communications, entrepreneurial).*
4) *Institution's Judgment (faculty nominations).*

While traditional academic measures such as SAT® score and class rank are strong predictors of the first area (scholarship), success is generally viewed more broadly. Students who show leadership and significant accomplishments tend to be hardworking, organized, and disciplined, although it was noted that these characteristics also correlate with academic success.

Some benchmarks such as graduating on time, winning competitive awards, honors for independent study, and admission to graduate school can be quantified. Other indications are relative:

- *acquiring an understanding of one's own culture and the culture of others*
- *gaining social confidence*
- *developing ethical judgment*
- *winning public recognition for service*
- *displaying effective leadership*
- *gaining direction and self-awareness*
- *producing high-quality creative works*

As with the development of an admissions decision-making model, the criterion for success must be developed in the context of the institutional mission. One institution's goal is to train future leaders; therefore, to determine whether a student has been successful in college, the questions must go beyond grades and whether a student has actually attained a college degree. For example:

- *Has the student used the collegiate experience in a way that allows the student to participate as a leader (intellectual, scientific, cultural, political, artistic, etc.) in the state and nation after graduation?*
- *Will this student attend graduate school?*
- *Has the student used the opportunity during her collegiate years to develop intellectual maturity and wisdom?*

From students' (and perhaps their parents') perspectives, the list of criteria for success might be different. Some might define it as acquiring the skills needed to succeed in a career. Others may define success by future earning power. Just getting the degree might be success enough for some. And there are undeniable social criteria that some students might list—developing friendships, having fun, or even finding a mate.

Most colleges view their role as preparing students for the adult world. Other personal qualities that are important are a desire to involve oneself in the community, evidence of tolerance and compassion as the student relates to others in the community, and satisfaction with life.

At some institutions, the faculty have gone beyond general statements of success to describing the underlying competencies that they expect will be demonstrated by successful graduates. For example, this list was developed for a liberal arts college.[3]

1. *Knowledge and Intellectual Competencies*
   - *Possesses analytical thinking skills, using both quantitative and qualitative methods*
   - *Can transfer skills among different disciplines*
   - *Can solve open-ended problems*
   - *Possesses good oral and written communication skills*
   - *Recognizes and appreciates the importance of humanistic and social science perspectives and values the contribution of individuals who embody those perspectives*
   - *Can generate original ideas, approaches, and solutions*
   - *Possesses skills and interests that prepare him/her for ongoing learning*
   - *Possesses interest and desire to initiate inquiry*

2. *Integrative Competencies*
   - *Understands the relationships among science, technology, and society*
   - *Understands how moral values shape human choices*
   - *Understands fundamental moral questions facing individuals and society*
   - *Can reason logically about moral questions facing individuals and society*
   - *Can apply understandings about moral questions to specific personal, professional, and civic decisions*

3. *Social and Cultural Competencies*
   - *Can work both independently and as a member of a team*
   - *Understands American cultures from a variety of perspectives*
   - *Understands political rights and responsibilities and participates in helping solve local, national, or global community problems*
   - *Develops appropriate friendships and relationships by respecting the rights of others and resolving interpersonal conflicts*
   - *Respects and values individual differences and functions in an intercultural context*

4. *Personal Competencies*
- *Can identify and access appropriate resources to meet personal and professional needs*
- *Works to make considered career and lifestyle choices*
- *Has the ability to cope with stress and maintain a healthy self-image*
- *Maintains physical activity, regular hygiene, good nutrition, appropriate sleep regimen, safe sex, and substance abuse avoidance*

Colleges and universities have typically used grades for ease of quantitative analysis and interpretation. But grades are only a proxy for things like knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These fold into higher-order thinking skills, problem solving, emotional and psychological maturity, community and civic engagement, life skills, etc.

Colonial colleges had the mission of forming the whole person. As institutions emphasize the preparation for specific fields and for graduate study in particular fields, they may be moving away from valuing the education of the whole student. Clearly, it is important for each institution to reflect on how it defines success for its graduates and to assure that the overall admissions philosophy and specific admissions criteria and practice are consistent with this vision.

THE STRUCTURE OF ADMISSIONS POWER

There seem to be just about as many different blueprints for the ultimate authority for both general admissions policies as well as individual admissions decisions as there are institutions. At one extreme, the director of admissions is simply a respected adviser to the president with whom all admissions decisions rest—ranging from adoption of an overall enrollment management plan to individual admissions decisions. At another extreme is an institution that has vested all responsibility for admissions policy and individual decisions with the dean of admissions. Some states have legislatively mandated policies. And some systems have oversight boards that have final authority for different types of admissions policies.

One of the more common structures calls for some level of faculty involvement, either in an absolute or advisory capacity. In addition to establishing policy, faculty are also often engaged in different ways in evaluating individual applications. One institution described a process that was in place until a few years ago where faculty actually interviewed all prospective students and made all decisions. More common is the existence of a faculty admissions committee that meets periodically to establish or review policy and perhaps consider unusual situations.

What are the different approaches that can be used to select a class? Some institutions use formulas to admit or at times reject some or all of their students, while others approach admissions in a more comprehensive manner. The following descriptions of different approaches to crafting a class at four institutions illustrate the variety of approaches that are practiced.

Case #1

Admission to this private university is a highly democratic process that values candidates' intellectual capacity as well as many other personal attributes such as leadership potential, consideration for others, and moral character. At the same time, the process is also guided by an interest in composing a class that has variety and that will take advantage of all available resources.

Each folder includes a profile of extracurricular information, two teacher recommendations, a counselor statement, two essays, transcript, and an optional interview summary. Every applicant is considered in the context of the secondary school attended and the opportunities that have been available. While many staff are familiar with the schools that applicants come from, each transcript is accompanied by a school profile so all readers have information about the applicant's high school. Other important considerations are whether or not the student has overcome any hardships, family background (alumni status of parents or first generation to attend college), and affirmative action. There is an internal 13-page document outlining how to read an admissions folder.

There were approximately 14,000 applications last year, and each was read at least twice. One of the readings was by the admissions staff member responsible for that particular geographic area. The area reader spent about 20 minutes on each folder. The second "outside" reader spent about 10–15 minutes on each application. Reader ratings were 1, 2, and 3. The relatively few folders that received "1" ratings from both readers were placed on the automatic admit list and the folders that received "3" ratings from both readers were placed on the reject list. The vast majority of files, however, received at least one "2" rating and were slated for full committee discussion.

At this institution a committee is composed of six to eight senior admissions staff and faculty. Committees meet seven days a week for a period of six weeks. The area reader presents the slate of applicants from that geographical region and then the committee votes to admit, deny, defer, or place the student on the waiting list. At the end of the process, staff evaluate whether or not they have overadmitted and if necessary revise decisions. Before the final decisions are made, any committee member has the opportunity to ask for full reconsideration of a candidate.

This process is highly laborious and as the number of applications increase, it may be necessary to consider shortcuts.

Case #2

In the broadest sense, the mission of this large public institution is to serve the people of the state, and admission to the university is seen as a reward for its citizens. But, as with many public institutions, the applicant pool has grown and capacity has been reached in some academic areas—thus necessitating a more selective admissions system.

The admissions process begins with a formula. An Admissions Index—a combination of high school performance (class standing and GPA) and standardized test scores—is calculated for each applicant. These two factors are inversely related, so that students with higher class standing can afford lower test scores to be admitted. A grid is used that divides the applicant pool into thirds based on their Admissions Index. The highest third is generally automatically admitted, although the index may be adjusted during the year to meet increased applicant pressure for specific majors.

A committee consisting of faculty and admissions staff reviews students whose Admissions Index falls below the range for regular admission. This committee is charged with evaluating the student's file and determining if an exception is merited. In the review process, the committee focuses on the applicant's academic records, but also considers socioeconomic background, leadership, service, school participation, bilingual proficiency, first generation college status, and special achievements or recognitions (IB, AP®, etc). Context is important in this process, and the committee is mindful of the fact that many applicants must work to help support their families; therefore, leadership opportunities are not always possible for those students.

Students who do not qualify for admission are offered several options: 1) attend summer school as a provisional student and earn fall admission by completing specific courses with a minimum GPA; 2) transfer from another institution; or 3) participate in a special transitional program.

This transitional program is a new and attractive option for students who cannot or who do not wish to participate in the summer provisional program. It is also an excellent example of cooperation between a public university and a community college. Students participating in the program can come in the fall and live on campus while they complete their freshman level coursework at a nearby community college. Upon successful completion of their first year courses, the students are eligible to transfer.

Case #3

The admissions process at this specialized private institution is characterized by a narrowly defined focus on science, math, and engineering. Because of the nature and reputation of the institution, the applicant pool is self-selected and highly qualified.

The most important factor in the admission decision is to identify if and in what ways the applicant has demonstrated a passion for math, science, and/or technology. Elements of the applicant profile include: parental education; three essays; three teacher recommendations; AP, IB, etc.; other test results; math/science competitions; rigor of coursework; GPA; class rank; awards; employment; research; and papers. Attention is paid to how the applicant chooses to use discretionary time and to identify students who have a "reserve of energy."

Each of the applications is read by an admissions officer and faculty member and then presented to a committee consisting of admissions staff, faculty, and a student. The decision-making process is described as being extremely "holistic" in that information about all aspects of the candidate is considered together as a whole rather than as a simple checklist of independent attributes and qualifications.

Some of the particular challenges that this institution faces were echoed by others during the conference:

- *The application pool is growing while staff size is static or reduced.*
- *Training of committees is time-consuming.*
- *Impact on changing priorities within the institution–increasing diversity.*
- *Emotional involvement is difficult (assessing the application of a trustee's child, friend, etc.).*
- *Finding students who are actively involved in the field.*

Case #4

This large public institution processes about 13,000 applications a year. About 6,000 files require some type of reading. In selecting freshmen, the university does not make decisions solely on the basis of predicted academic performance. Important academic objectives are advanced by students having talents and skills derived from diverse backgrounds.

There are three primary admissions factors:
- *Academic Core Subjects (specific course requirements).*
- *Admissions Index Ranking (based on a formula of grades [3/4] and test scores [1/4]).*
- *Supplemental Review (both academic and personal factors).*

The supplemental review was initially developed to reward rigorous curricula and other academic factors. This review looks at the quality of the core curriculum, the grade trend, test results, school grading patterns, the senior year curriculum, and special talents and artistic awards. Each of these factors is assigned points following a detailed rating guide.

The supplemental review has been expanded to include personal factors: economic disadvantage, educational disadvantage, cultural awareness, personal adversity, school adversity, and school and community service. As with the academic factors, each of these personal factors is assigned points.

The academic and personal scores are not combined; instead, they are individually displayed on a grid with academic scores in columns and personal scores in rows. The intersection of academic and personal scores determines admissibility.

The admissions process to this institution is highly formulaic, but encompasses much more than the traditional measures of high school GPA and test scores. Although judgment must be used to assign supplemental review points, the overall system is generally understood by the public. Furthermore, the development of such a detailed system required a careful definition by the university's faculty senate of what characteristics it values in its student body.

One of the clear trends in admissions decision-making is the increased emphasis on reading and evaluating application folders rather than simply plugging numbers into a formula. At some institutions, all applications are reviewed and rated by one or more readers. Readers can be admissions staff, faculty, and in some cases external reviewers such as alumni and local counselors.

Training and monitoring the consistency of reader ratings are essential components of any admissions process that incorporates reading. Many institutions base their reading on the "holistic" approach that is used by the College Board and ETS in scoring essays on the AP Examinations and the SAT II: Writing Subject Test. In fact, faculty who have served as readers are often instrumental in working with admissions staff in defining samples of different ratings that might be used in the admissions process.

At the same time, given the increasing number of applications that many institutions are receiving (and shrinking resources in some cases), some institutions are considering ways to be more efficient in processing applications. Some have implemented a tiered approach, whereby applicants with certain characteristics (such as low grades, scores, reader ratings) are automatically rejected and those with other characteristics (a certain class rank, grades, scores or ratings) are automatically accepted. Various levels of appeal processes are common with this screening approach. Other institutions are considering whether a single reading would be sufficient, and at least one institution is investigating the possibility of using artificial intelligence computer-based reading to provide at least one evaluation of the students' essays.

As is evident from the previous discussion, most admissions decisions are based on multiple factors along different dimensions. Warren Willingham's *Success in College* (1985) outlined many different predictors of academic success, including both traditional academic predictors and many other qualities.

Personal Qualities and Academic Experiences: Predictors of Academic Success

Traditional Academic Predictors:
 HS Grades
  Rank
  Total GPA
  GPA Core Courses
 Admissions Test
  SAT I
  ACT
  SAT II
  Other

Supplemental Achievement Predictors:
 HS honors
 Community achievement
 Athletic achievement
 Leadership
 Creative achievement
 Follow-through
 Work experience
 Personal statement
  writing
  content
 Other Achievement Test in HS

Admissions Ratings:
 Interview rating
 Special talent (art, science)
 Special attribute (overcame hardship, rich experiences)

Goals and Plans:
 Important Goal
 Career
 Intellectual
 Creative
 Physical
 Leadership
 Social
 Uncertain Career Plans
 Educational Aspirations

Background:
 Gender
 Ethnicity/Race
 Residence
 SES
 Alumni ties
 School size
 School type
 School quality
   college going rate
   achievement
 Aid applicant
 Early decision
 Close-tie school
 Came for interview
 College courses in HS

Adapted from Willingham, W.W., Success in College.
The College Board (1985).

Although this list continues to be a useful point of departure, contemporary admissions is considerably richer and more complex. One clear trend is that, increasingly, each individual applicant is reviewed in the context of his or her unique background. In a way, this adds an additional layer to the admissions process, since students are not simply compared against each other or against an external set of criteria, but they are also compared against the opportunities they have been afforded.

Even traditional academic factors are reviewed from a more dynamic perspective. It is not simply that a student has met the requirements or taken a few honors or AP courses. Has the student sought out additional challenges? Is the senior year strong? Is there an upward trend in grades?

Admissions factors now include contextual information at both the individual and the school level. For example, background characteristics that are often considered include factors such as single parent home, size of family, language spoken at home, and whether others in the family have any college experience. Information about schools is also taken into account, and special consideration is given to students from low-performing schools, low-enrolling schools, or schools with whom the university has developed special outreach relationships.

State plans that offer automatic admission to the top four percent or top 10 percent (provided that other requirements are met) are essentially an extension of this contextual approach. It is simply one way to recognize and reward students who have risen to the top in their particular situation. However, participants noted that these plans are generally only one of many different ways a student might gain admission.

Another acknowledged trend is a strong interest in noncognitive variables, particularly where the institution has an interest in the admissions models that focus on a student's capacity to benefit or to contribute. Although not easily measurable, some understanding of a student's character, judgment, integrity, determination, time management skills, interest in being active in "college life," creative achievement, evidence of intellectual curiosity, talents, aspirations, and hardships encountered are important factors to consider in these models. In fact, this type of information might be used subconsciously in the review process, particularly for marginal applicants.

At most institutions, the concept of who should or should not be admitted is obviously not simply a question of academics. Although prediction is still a consideration, admissions is much more than simply forecasting which applicants have a good chance to attain a C or higher at a college or university.

There is widespread use of supplemental factors, in some cases objective and easily described, but in other cases, more subjective and perhaps less easily explained to the general public. Some participants suggested that there is a need to devote attention to measuring these supplemental factors. For example, what are the elements of leadership an institution might want to

recognize? How can we differentiate between a genuine leader and the gatherer of awards? There was also concern that supplemental criteria might be susceptible to manipulation. Nonetheless, there was consensus that consideration of supplemental factors was important and that efforts should be made to further define the full range of admissions factors that different institutions are using.

As admissions focuses more on an understanding of the whole student, as opposed to ranking students by their academic credentials, there is an opportunity for institutions to move from trying to simply attract large numbers of students with high GPAs, high scores, many AP courses, and other traditional academic trophies. Many institutions' marketing activities seem to be geared toward competing for the best and the brightest. But the use of a broader mix of admissions criteria should enable admissions officers to seek students with characteristics that best fit the college's mission and which would fit best within the institutional community. Such an expansion of the definition of appropriate admissions would not mean that the academic quality of the freshman class would decline. In fact, some institutions that have recently begun considering a broader range of characteristics have reported an improvement in academic quality and intellectual climate on campus, and a greater understanding and support from counselors for the process.

Conversely, in an ideal world from the student's perspective, the emphasis would change from "getting into the best place that will take me" to "finding the best place that would be good for me personally." In this ideal world, the frenzy of "getting in" would be replaced by a genuine exploration of individual goals and needs and a search for institutions that are best suited to meet those needs.

EVALUATING SUCCESS AND
REFINING THE PROCESS

There are many different views of success. Traditional admissions professionals bring a data-oriented approach to the process and are likely to employ predictive modeling as a measure of success. At the same time, there are broader institutional measures, such as enrolled student satisfaction surveys or levels of alumni giving. There are also political/environmental considerations, particularly at public institutions, such as how well a class or the total enrollment reflects the overall population of areas served.

Participants urged that admissions be defined much more broadly than simply making decisions about who will and who will not be admitted. Outreach, recruitment, and financial aid practices must support the broader institutional goals. And institutions need to work closely with the K–12 sector to assure that students receive adequate academic preparation and that students, particularly those from families with no experience in the college admissions process, know the minimum course requirements.

Many institutions are re-evaluating their entire admissions operations. There is interest in identifying the nonacademic factors of success, but students still need to meet certain levels of preparedness. And while there are large numbers of applicants who are "well packaged," it's much more difficult to find real students who are self-motivated (the internally motivated student rather than the externally motivated one).

The conference concluded with a discussion of the concept of "best practices" and whether there might be a universal definition or exemplar approach that might be held up as a national model. While there was general agreement that there were some universal principles, the participants argued that each institution needed to develop their own "best practices" in the context of their unique institutional mission. In fact, it was emphasized that everyone involved in admissions needs to clearly understand the institution's mission.

Other important attributes of a "best practices" admissions model is that it be consistent, based on sound decisions, and consonant with the institution's values. At the same time, the model needs to be flexible and poised for change.

Fairness is a critical component of the process, although it was acknowledged that fairness is often defined in the eye of the beholder. Institutions need to feel comfortable answering these questions: How equitable are the criteria we're using and can they be applied equally across the state (or region or country)? How easily can I explain our procedures and how credible is my explanation? People want to appeal and contest. Does our process lend itself to this level of inspection?

Another participant, drawing on *The Shape of the River*[4], suggested four criteria that might be used to evaluate "best practices":

- *Individually and collectively have we enrolled students who can take advantage of what the institution has to offer?*
- *Can the students contribute to the intellectual life of the college? Does a student bring more than just a well-prepared but empty vessel to the academic enterprise?*
- *Can the students use what they have learned at the institution to benefit the greater society? Does or will the class as graduates improve the greater society, e.g., does more than pay taxes and vote?*
- *Outcome is defined by what the* graduating *class looks like rather than what the* freshman *class looks like. Does that graduating class mirror the greater society in terms of gender and ethnic diversity, SES, geography, and culture?*

Is there a need to develop and disseminate materials? Yes, there is a need to develop and disseminate materials for the profession to help institutions review and refine their admissions policies. However, the materials should provide lenses through which to consider, evaluate, and modify admissions practices. American higher education institutions are so varied, and contextual factors must be considered. What works in Connecticut may be disastrous in South Dakota.

At issue is the credibility of the process. On one hand, counselors think that better decisions are being made with comprehensive review, and parents seem to be more comfortable with this approach. On the other hand, some

observers believe that a comprehensive process is random or arbitrary because it is not entirely quantifiable. If a valedictorian is not admitted, the process appears arbitrary. The admissions profession needs to help the public understand that "subjective" is not arbitrary, but rather a way to take into consideration the many different strengths and characteristics that the individuals applying to a particular institution bring to the table.

Participants agreed that it was important to continue the discussion among professionals about exactly what we mean by "best practices in the admissions decision-making process." It was suggested that discussions continue through College Board regional councils and other similar fora.

In addition, this conference provided a number of suggestions for a research agenda—perhaps updating the Personal Qualities research conducted in the early 1980s or evaluating ways that the process could focus more on helping both students and institutions find the best match. Further information is needed to help institutions explain their processes to the general public. And research models might be provided to institutions to help them evaluate their admissions procedures from various legal and public relations perspectives.

Most important, however, was the need to further define the vast variety of approaches that an institution might employ to implement an admissions practice that advances its institutional mission and to outline the tradeoffs involved in different approaches. It was suggested that training sessions be offered for both experienced and new admissions officers, as well as counselors and others involved in the process. Once we develop a more comprehensive definition of the process, we can move to the next step and begin the process of educating the public. This step will be a continuous one given that the interested public changes every year and that everyone needs to be able to see how each individual applicant fits in the process both generally and at the individual institutions to which she is applying. And the education process must make all understand that what is important at one institution might be viewed quite differently at another.

ENDNOTES

1. Perfetto, Greg, ed. 1999. *Toward a Taxonomy of the Admissions Decision-Making Process*. New York, N.Y.: The College Board.

2. Willingham, W.W. 1985. *Success in College*. New York, N.Y.: The College Board. and Willingham, W.W. 1982. *Personal Qualities and College Admissions.* New York, N.Y.: The College Board.

3. This list of competencies was created by the Harvey Mudd College Assessment Committee. This committee is composed of faculty, staff, students, and alumni.

4. Bowen, William G. and Bok, Derek Curtis. 1999. *The Shape of the River*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

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