

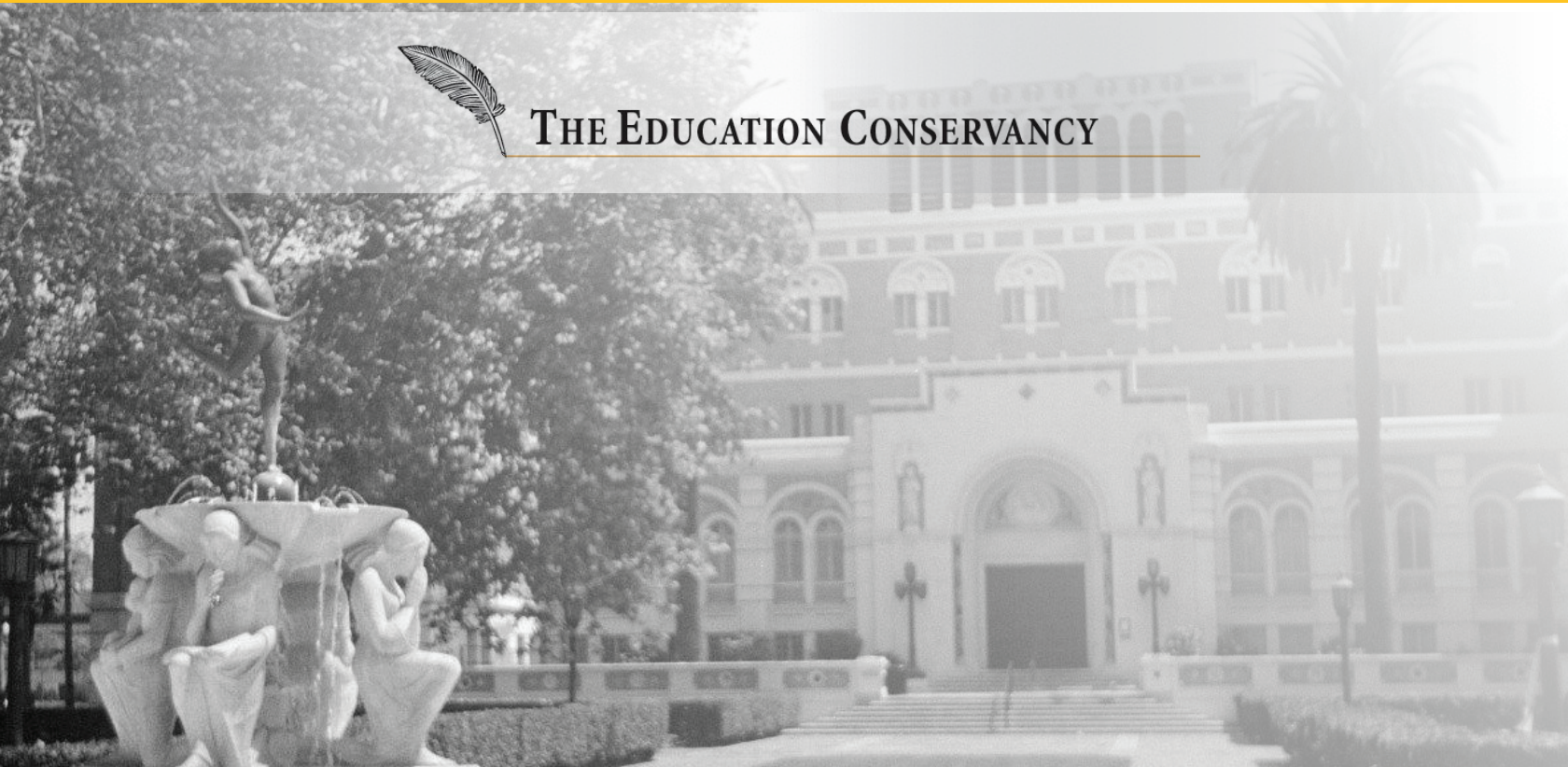


USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice

in partnership with



THE EDUCATION CONSERVANCY



A CALL FOR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

A Report Informed and Inspired by the Los Angeles Conference Jan 26-28, 2011

THE CASE FOR CHANGE IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

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Introductory Letter

from Jerome Lucido and Lloyd Thacker

Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to present the written results of “The Case for Change in College Admissions.” The enclosed documents describe the case as it was made and present the meeting’s success as a positive step forward. We are grateful to each of the 180 participants for their contributions, and we invite ongoing involvement and leadership from the broader educational community.

Conceived as a venue for candid conversation about selective college admission, the quality and nature of participation revealed a compelling case for change. The willingness and ability of institutional leaders to examine the impact of the selective college admissions environment on institutional mission and on American society can be viewed as commendable, instructive, and inspirational.

Within these pages you will find the meeting agenda, a list of the institutions represented, and a paper that presents the Case for Change as it emerged from the meeting’s keynoters, panelists, and participants. Also included is a recently published article from Change Magazine written by Sandy Baum and Mike McPherson that presents the thoughts they shared during our meeting. Finally, the candid remarks of participants generated during the idea harvesting session, moderated by Jeff Brenzel, are compiled together and serve to convey the special nature of this professional gathering to our many colleagues who were not able to attend.

We solicit your help in crafting our next steps. Please consider the following questions and let us know:

- Do you find the case for change compelling?
- What activities would constitute productive next steps?
- What would you be willing to do to help?

We would like to thank the Lumina Foundation for Education, the College Board, and the Spencer Foundation for their generous support of the Case for Change meeting. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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Executive Summary

The Case for Change in College Admissions: A Call for Individual and Collective Leadership

Does the selective college admissions system resemble one that educators would create? What must be done to reshape college admissions in the public interest?

In January 2011 the University of Southern California Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice in conjunction with the Education Conservancy convened a national workshop – a unique experiment meant to consider “The Case for Change in College Admissions.” Its 180 participants included university and college admissions officers as well as faculty members and administrative leaders of selective private and public higher education institutions throughout the U.S. Also participating were members of both the federal and state higher education policy communities, higher education scholars, leaders of associations, and other stakeholders. This meeting, which was generously funded by the College Board, Lumina Foundation, and Spencer Foundation, was uniquely distinguished by the enthusiastic participation of attendees. At the same time, there was a widely shared sense of urgency that the level and nature of competition among attendees’ institutions was threatening education. A pervasive conviction among participants was that colleges and the public interest would be better served by reining in certain practices and engaging in cooperative behavior. Most emphatically expressed was a call for individual and collective leadership. This executive summary provides distillations of several prominent thoughts, ideas, and suggestions presented at the event. Readers are encouraged to digest the complete companion paper for further context and deeper understanding. The insights from this conference derive not just from empirical research, but also from years of professional experience. Altogether, this collection of arguments makes the case for change, recommends corrective actions, and challenges each member of the educational community to find a space for leadership and action in the public interest.

At a time when higher education is critically important to ensuring the nation’s continued vitality and competitiveness in a global society, the U.S. has fallen from first to twelfth in the proportion of its citizens with a college degree. In the interconnected and competitive global society, an educated, adaptive workforce and citizenry is a necessity for any nation that seeks to retain its vitality and help address evolving societal challenges. As institutions held in public trust, colleges have an opportunity and an obligation to ensure their admissions policies and practices best serve our country’s educational well-being.

Despite many sincere efforts by enrollment professionals to do just that, the presentations and exchanges of this meeting described an increasingly competitive, inwardly focused selective admissions system – one that has evolved to advance individual interests of colleges while falling short of serving the ideals traditionally associated with higher education. The values and behaviors this system signals as important, and its tendency to reward only a narrow band of students, undermine progress toward our nation’s educational attainment goals – and by extension, the social, economic, and civic vitality of our nation’s future.

Deteriorating Values and Behavior

All too often college admission has become a process that:

- Provides incentives for institutions to elicit large numbers of applications from students only to turn them down in order to reinforce an image of selectivity;
- Bestows unwarranted value to standardized tests as a supreme measure of academic competence, creating the impression that test scores are more important than a student’s actual learning or development, and giving rise to multi-billion dollar industries in testing, test-prep, and test coaching;
- Reinforces a cynical attitude in students that gaining admission to a selective institution is an end in itself rather than the beginning of an educational journey – an attitude that gives rise to widespread cheating and gaming the system in high school while contributing to a weakened demand for effective teaching and a devaluation of learning in college;
- Hinders colleges and universities from taking any action out of step with prevailing practice, regardless of its educational benefits, for the fear that such divergence would cause an individual institution to lose competitive standing with its peers.

Impediments to Inclusivity

In addition to imprudent values and behavior, current elements of the higher education system – and admission policies and practices among selective institutions in particular – hinder college participation and degree completion rates among underserved students, which is necessary to enhance the nation’s attainment rates. Examples include the following:

- The practice of conferring significance to standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT beyond what they actually measure;
- A substantial shift of student financial aid away from awards based on financial need toward merit-based awards – a practice that directs funding away from needy students toward those who are already economically and educationally advantaged;
- Decreases in financial support for public universities and colleges, causing tuitions to rise and incentivizing the pursuit of wealthier students;
- Increasing institutional competition for standing and prestige, often achieved at a price of neglecting external social costs and public interest obligations

Identifying the Space for Moral Action

A question frequently raised by meeting participants was how selective higher education institutions could operate more effectively in the public interest. Every college and university works to fulfill its mission within constraints, yet those constraints nonetheless admit some space for moral action. The path to constructive change in the admissions process begins with a recognition that any university or college has some discretion to adopt admissions practices that accord more closely with its core educational values. A next step, then, is for an institution to work constructively within that space – while at the same time pursuing strategies to expand it. By asking certain questions, colleges can begin to assess how their admission practices comport with educationally desirable outcomes and how corrective action could better serve institutional mission and the public interest.

Some questions concern the impact of the admissions process on high schools and, more particularly, on students applying to college.

We should ask ourselves:

- What is the demographic composition of our entering class in terms of ethnicity, educational and economic background?
- What impact does our admission process have on the behavior of high schools in terms of the classes they offer and teaching methods they employ? Do our policies encourage genuine learning and self-improvement or cynicism toward education in high school and college? How do our admission practices affect students' attitudes with regard to cheating or gaming the system?
- How does our admission process affect the attitudes about education that admitted students develop?
- What is the impact on non-admitted students and their parents?
- What is the collective impact of the signals sent by the admissions system, and to what degree does our institution contribute to those signals?

A further set of questions could cast in sharper relief the relationship between an institution's educational mission and its competitive market considerations:

- Are our admission practices in line with the educational values we espouse? Do we seek students who have already learned the most or those who could learn most from being here?
- Are there students who could learn more from being here if the institution changed some of its behaviors – in its admissions practices and its programs of learning?
- Do we attract primarily students who seek to prepare themselves for socially valuable work in such careers as education, social work, or nursing – or students who are mainly interested in highly remunerative careers that benefit their individual well-being in the highest degree?
- To what extent can ethical considerations be regarded as secondary to the interest of financial stability and status?

Corrective Opportunities

In addition to asking these questions, institutional stakeholders, including presidents, trustees, faculty, and enrollment professionals should embrace the following opportunities to remake a more equitable and value-driven higher education community:

1. Measure What Matters

- Align the use of standardized tests with their real (documented) value;
- Help the public understand that selectivity in itself is not a proxy for the quality of education a student attains;
- Develop measures in addition to persistence and graduation rates to express an institution's impact on student learning;
- Develop and apply measures of academic progress and success within the academic major as well as within general education curricula;
- Find ways to express the contribution a higher education institution makes to a student's learning, development, and maturity – including contributions that may not be easily quantifiable;
- Develop and implement methods beyond the student course evaluation to gauge effective teaching;
- Calibrate the number of students who enter different professions and careers following graduation.

2. Employ Practices that Contribute to the Public Interest

- Curtail or eliminate the practice of awarding institutional merit aid to students at the expense of assisting students with financial need;
- Take the risk of admitting more students who show educational promise outside the standard metrics used to gauge institutional selectivity;
- Adopt local schools, helping their students understand the value of higher education and prepare for college-level study;
- Consider the development of collaborative admission models to help alleviate some of the destructive anxiety students experience in applying to selective universities and colleges;
- Commit to a judicious growth in the size of selective institutions to accommodate intensive demand;
- Collaborate with a range of higher education institutions to convey the importance of students choosing a university or college that seems to be a good educational match;
- Commit to a practice of not sending marketing materials to students who have a very small chance of being admitted to a selective institution;
- Decline to participate in perception-based rankings of higher education institutions;
- Work collectively to convey that not being admitted to a highly selective institution is not a condemning judgment about a student's educational potential or value as a human being.

Leadership - Toward Individual and Collective Action

The challenge to improve college admissions has created a prominent stage for educational leadership to emerge within selective colleges and universities throughout the United States. Institutional stakeholders who truly care about making a difference for education beyond their own institutions can distinguish themselves by serving as leaders on this stage. Creating a college admissions process that better exemplifies educational values and contributes more directly to the nation's public interests will require courage, imagination, and commitment. Education is ready for a truly altered mindset in the leadership of higher education institutions. It will be necessary to hold in abeyance some of the spirit that conceives of success in college admissions as prevailing over the competition at any cost, and to ask whether the increasing drive to selectivity and mass appeal is exacerbating the inequalities that raised the educational stakes in the first place.

Institutions and their leaders must come to view the admissions process from a perspective beyond the narcissistic glass of competitive rankings, and to see themselves as others see them – to recognize themselves as part of a larger system of institutions that make up the terrain of college choice and impact educational values and behaviors. Adopting this perspective requires that institutions ask different kinds of questions: Where do opportunities for deeper cultural interaction and understanding exist? What better attitudes toward the value of learning and achievement might take root, and what beneficial results might come about from admitting more students with promising credentials outside the standard metrics of selectivity? What students whom we admitted might have done better in another setting? How can college admissions better reflect and serve educational values? Given the enormity of the educational challenges confronting the nation, colleges and universities must come to regard themselves not as feudal fiefdoms but as integrally linked nodes in a network of shared educational purposes. Selective institutions must work together in adopting enrollment management practices that serve the public interest in more effective ways. Institutional stakeholders will need to rise to the challenge of identifying their individual and collective obligations. In taking these steps, higher education can make important strides in shaping the nation's class for the decades ahead.

The Case for Change in College Admissions: A Call for Individual and Collective Leadership

Nothing is more American than the ideal of individual advancement and success. The vision of starting anew, moving beyond the boundaries of social standing and economic circumstance, realizing one's full potential in a land committed to freedom and opportunity has been an inspiration for generations of Americans. Particularly in the last 60 years, higher education in the United States has evolved in the spirit of supporting individual aspirations regardless of social or economic background. No other nation has aimed to create a higher education system that leads the world in academic strength and the creation of new knowledge, while at the same time making a college education available to anyone seeking to learn regardless of ability to pay.

Closely linked with the ideal of freedom and individual pursuit is the fact of competition as a core element of American life and educational aspiration. The nation's colleges and universities constitute a sorting system that fosters competition among students; it is a system that allows talent to identify itself and leadership to emerge. But in recent years competition in the college admissions process has become so intensified that it undermines many of the core values of learning and self-improvement that colleges and universities were founded to advance. While the negative impact of hyper-competition appears most vividly in the process of admission to the most selective universities and colleges, the effects can be seen through all sectors of higher education. The admissions process has come to resemble the metamorphosis of collegiate athletics from an integral component of undergraduate learning to a quasi-professional entity with a life of its own, essentially divorced from the educational mission. Too often in college admissions as in athletics the competition itself – the need to win and win big – has all but eclipsed any sense of educational value associated with the process – for institutions and students alike.

In January 2011 the University of Southern California Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice in conjunction with the Education Conservancy convened a national conference to consider the Case for Change in College Admissions. The conference was generously funded by the College Board, Lumina Foundation, and Spencer Foundation. Its 180 participants included university and college admissions officers as well as faculty members and administrative leaders of selective private and public higher education institutions throughout the U.S. Also participating were members of both the federal and state higher education policy communities, higher education scholars, leaders of associations, and other stakeholders. This essay recounts central themes from the conference and offers recommendations for shaping a higher education admissions process that better reflects the core values of education itself while contributing more effectively to the nation's collective purposes through higher education. The presentations and exchanges of this meeting described a higher education admissions process that in many ways falls short in serving the needs of students, parents, and the nation's public interest. Ideally the college admissions process might be conceived as one that encourages reflection, analysis, and self-discovery in students, teaching them to evaluate information and take responsibility for an important life decision. Such a process would help students identify and enroll in colleges most appropriate for their educational and personal development. In fact, however, the college admissions process in the U.S. can easily appear to be an operation in which educational values have been supplanted by competitive interests, motivated by market considerations, and detached from all moorings in educational mission. All too often college admission has become a process that:

Ideally the college admissions process might be conceived as one that encourages reflection, analysis, and self-discovery in students, teaching them to evaluate information and take responsibility for an important life decision.

- Distorts students' relationships with learning, causing them to regard the high school years as an Olympic training season demanding ever-greater feats of accomplishment in order to qualify for admission to a selective university or college;
- Provides incentives for institutions to elicit large numbers of applications from students only to turn them down in order to reinforce an image of selectivity;
- Bestows unwarranted value to standardized tests as a supreme measure of academic competence, creating the impression that test scores are more important than a student's actual learning or development, and giving rise to multi-billion dollar industries in testing, test-prep, and test coaching;
- Diverts funds from need-based to merit-based financial aid, effectively excluding substantial numbers of lower-income students from college participation;
- Reinforces a cynical attitude in students that gaining admission to a selective institution is an end in itself rather than the beginning of an educational journey – an attitude that gives rise to widespread cheating and gaming the system in high school while contributing to a weakened demand for effective teaching and a devaluation of learning in college;
- Signals that the reason for gaining entry to a selective institution is to gain advantage for entry into a lucrative profession, in effect discouraging students from fields of study that prepare for lower-paying careers of service to society;
- Feeds a sense of inflated self-esteem and superiority in many students who succeed in gaining admission to highly selective institutions – an attitude that hinders the capacity for empathy and widens the separation between the most and least privileged in society;
- Hinders colleges and universities from taking any action out of step with prevailing practice, from the fear that such divergence would cause an institution to lose competitive standing with its peers;

- Forces state flagship universities into the admissions arms race in search of wealthier students, as state governments reduce expenditures for higher education, thereby weakening public institutions' ability to offer admission to all qualified residents of a state.

A Tale Twice Told

Concern about the detrimental effects of the college admissions process is certainly not a new phenomenon. The negative impact on students seeking admission to the nation's selective institutions has been a subject of conversation for more than two decades. From the mid-1980s to the present, critics have observed how the drive to gain admission to a selective university or college distorts the middle and high school years as a season of learning and discovery. Then as now, observers have noted how the process complicates and unhinges friendships as peers compete to be among the limited number of those who gain admission to a highly selective institution. The multi-billion dollar testing, test-prep, test counseling, and ranking industries reinforce a delusion that equates personal success with admission to one particular institution – and that causes a student to interpret a rejection from that pinnacle of all hopes as a catastrophic life failure. The process comes to seem arbitrary and deterministic as certain attributes such as the number of Advanced Placement (AP) credits assume an importance out of proportion to their actual contribution to the educational result, much as peacock's feathers or a moose's antlers get rewarded in the mating process despite their dubious functional utility.

A Changing National and Global Circumstance

What has changed though these years, however, is the educational attainment of the U.S. population relative to other nations. At a time when higher education is critically important to ensuring the nation's continued vitality and competitiveness in a global society, the U.S. has fallen from first to twelfth in the proportion of its citizens with a college degree. President Obama has called for the U.S. to educate an additional 8 million young people beyond the 3 million who are projected to earn college degrees by 2020; in like measure, the Lumina Foundation has announced a goal of having 60% of the U.S. population attain high-quality postsecondary degrees by 2025. In the interconnected and competitive global society, an educated, adaptive workforce and citizenry is a necessity for any nation that seeks to retain its vitality and help address evolving societal challenges. The difficulty of reaching such national goals for education is accentuated by the economic recession which has left many states unable to fund their public universities and colleges at a level that sustains educational opportunity for all state residents seeking higher education.

One of the greatest challenges now confronting the nation is to foster greater educational participation and degree attainment among those whom colleges and universities have traditionally served less well: lower-income students, first-generation students, and members of under-represented minorities. Through the past three decades the attainment gap between higher- and lower-income students has not changed.

Impediments to Inclusivity

In fact the current system of higher education admissions, particularly among highly selective universities and colleges, has the effect of discouraging students of lower income, including underrepresented minorities, from applying to college. Six elements of the higher education system – and its admission process in particular – work against the nation's progress in increasing college participation and degree completion rates among lower-income students:

- The practice of conferring significance to standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT beyond what they actually measure;
- A substantial shift of student financial aid away from awards based on financial need toward merit-based awards – a practice that directs funding away from needy students toward those who are already economically and educationally advantaged;
- The systemic under-funding of education for students at the lowest end of the economic spectrum, not just in K-12 schooling but in higher education as well;
- The inability of many states to provide financial support for their public universities and colleges in the same degree as before, causing tuitions to rise as higher education comes increasingly to be regarded as a private rather than a public good;
- The disinclination of many traditional universities and colleges to reach out to students of lower income for whom a college education could yield a life transformation;
- The increasing institutional competition for standing and prestige, often achieved at a price of neglecting external social costs and public interest obligations.

Standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT have been heavily used in college admissions to provide an additional gauge of academic promise beyond high school grades. Each year some three million high school graduates take the SAT and ACT exams – in many cases more than once. The prospect of taking one of these tests and having scores sent to a desired set of institutions generates anxiety in students and their parents, intensified by the misplaced emphasis on this measure in the college rankings and in the promotional literature of colleges and universities themselves. Standardized tests have become a basis not just for university and college bragging rights, but also for rating high schools and determining the value of real estate.

The emphasis on the score itself creates a distorted image of the application process – one that undermines the value of college choice itself as a process of learning and growth in students. The preoccupation with standardized test scores in the rankings and media causes this measure to take on a significance greatly exceeding their presumptive value as an auxiliary to high school grades in indicating a student’s likelihood of succeeding in college.

It is interesting to note that in a recent set of interviews the Education Conservancy conducted with high school students in the college admissions process, discontent with standardized tests was the feeling students most often volunteered without any prompting from the interview questions. These interviews conveyed the depth of student resentment over pressures to take and retake ACT or SAT, as if scoring well on the test was itself a fundamental measure of self-worth. Students who described themselves as principled and conscientious in their approach to study in school expressed the cynicism that testing evoked; the hypersignificance ascribed to testing caused many to conclude that a high test score was the ultimate goal to be achieved by any means, including cheating.

Using SAT or ACT scores as a determining factor in the admissions process allows a selective institution to claim that it attracts the best and brightest while ensuring that it enrolls a substantial share of students from the highest income categories. Whether intended or not, all too often the effect of standardized tests in admissions decisions is to solidify social and economic disparities among different segments of the population, and to recast the conception of academic merit in terms of family income.

Another indicator of sorting by income is the increased practice of awarding financial aid to students without regard for actual financial need, a practice that results in increased subsidies to those who can afford college and a reduction of aid to the needy. A 2008 report of the Institute for College Access and Success, entitled “Time to Reexamine Institutional Cooperation on Financial Aid,” cites a College Board survey of 946 universities and colleges in 2005-6, which found that \$3.3 billion in institutional aid awarded was non-need based while calculated unmet need of admitted students was \$2.4 billion. On the one hand, there are good arguments for institutions to make limited and judicious use of merit aid to attract some students who could add to the vitality of an incoming class while also contributing a significant share of their tuition costs from family sources. On the basis of this sample of institutions, however, need-blind awards now constitute approximately one-third of grant aid that four-year institutions provide to college students. This practice has grown to the point of significantly reducing the funds available to qualified students from lower income households who could benefit from a college education. Furthermore, providing subsidies to those who can afford to pay for college creates a huge financial burden on institutions which adds to the cost of higher education as a whole.

Another indicator of sorting by income is the increased practice of awarding financial aid to students without regard for actual financial need, a practice that results in increased subsidies to those who can afford college and a reduction of aid to the needy.

A third indicator of disparity in the sorting process can be seen in the amount of funds that institutions at different points of the spectrum spend to educate students. It is natural that students of different interests, preparation, and motivation should sort themselves into different types of institutions. It would not be surprising that the higher a student’s family income, the more likely he or she is to attend a private not-for-profit university or college. The average yearly expenditures per student among higher education institutions range from about \$5,000 at community colleges to some \$19,500 for private research universities. Considering the size of this spending gap, however, one could reasonably ask: What is the marginal productivity of the last dollar spent in each type of institution? How could a reallocation of those dollars result in more effective progress in meeting the nation’s public purposes through higher education?

The combination of testing, rankings, financial aid availability, peer anxiety and competition, and the impact of rejection on those who had aimed high can easily create a foreboding impression of college admission and attendance, particularly to students from the lower end of the income spectrum. One result is a tendency of lower-income students, including minorities and first-generation college attenders, to “under-match” by choosing a college or university from a less competitive category than their academic qualifications would support. As William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson point out in *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*, in some cases the combination of institutional policies and implied social messages cause promising students from lower-income groups to pass over an institution for which they are academically qualified in favor of one that offers a less intimidating, more welcoming environment that is more familiar in terms of the social and economic backgrounds of other students. In choosing not to apply for admission to a college or university that more nearly matches their academic qualifications, however, lower-income students opt for an institution in which they are less likely to persist to graduation. The attrition rate of students who under-match in their choice of an institution is higher than that of students who choose an institution commensurate with their academic qualifications.

The under-funding of public higher education is another factor in an educational sorting process that hinders the nation’s ability to meet its goal

of a more highly educated population. Public universities and colleges, which have depended on state support as a major revenue source, have faced repeated cuts as virtually every state struggles to reconcile its balance sheet in a period of deep and lingering recession. A fundamental promise of public higher education has been to open doors of opportunity to all state residents who seek to advance themselves through higher education regardless of income. The effect of successive budget cuts, however, has been to curtail that promise in state after state. Within the past two years particularly, state systems and individual flagship universities have found themselves crossing a sad threshold in which revenue collected from student tuition exceeds the state's total financial contribution toward students' education. The example of one state's flagship university is instructive: through the 1990s the state's per-student support amounted to \$14,000; today that number is \$5,000 in constant dollars. Tuition for in-state residents during this time has risen from \$3,000 to \$11,000. Many are concerned that the shifting ratio of state appropriation to tuition has contributed to a fundamental reconception of higher education: there is less of a shared conviction in American society today that higher education is a public good that benefits society and warrants public support. In its place has emerged an understanding of higher education as a private good that confers individual advantage to those who are willing and able to pay.

One result of this changing scenario has been to push state flagship universities into the arms race for higher-income students. The strategy for many public institutions has been to attract more out-of-state and international students who pay higher tuition, even at the expense of admitting qualified students from within the state. Students who have begun their studies at a community college may well find that their chances of transferring to a public university in their own state are slimmer than they were given to understand in first enrolling. As states lose the ability to be good financial stewards of their public universities and colleges, state residents of lower income in particular may find a curtailment of opportunity in the public college or university system.

Many capable students who now choose proprietary institutions could enroll and thrive in traditional not-for-profit higher education institutions, including the most selective universities and colleges, often at lower cost.

This development is particularly troubling when considered in the context of the nation's changing demographics. Higher education's entering class in ten years will be more diverse than today's in terms of its social, economic, and racial composition. A larger proportion of the entering class will consist of lower-income and minority students that traditional higher education institutions have not served

particularly well in the past. A growing share of the nation's young people will lack the educational advantages from their K-12 schooling that help them recognize the benefits of higher education or understand the need to prepare for college through the middle and high school years. As the basic requirements for entry and advancement in the workforce increasingly come to include a college degree, the need to educate more students from less advantaged populations has become a national imperative. The tendency of many traditional institutions of higher education, however, has been to think first of their revenue-generating prospects, and to assign lower priority to this changing demographic profile from a conviction that less advantaged students are "not our market."

Increasingly, the institutions that do consider economically and educationally disadvantaged students as part of their market are those in the for-profit sector. Through the past decade the most dramatic growth in higher education has occurred in proprietary institutions, which now account for 12% of all higher education enrollments. This sector has been subject to intense scrutiny and criticism not just for its low completion rates, but also for questionable recruitment practices and an excessive reliance on the federal financial aid system. At the same time, for-profit institutions have appealed to many students because of their more accommodating class schedules, their ability to offer a standardized curriculum in a variety of locations, and their successful use of the internet as well as traditional classroom instruction in teaching and learning. For-profits are very much a part of the higher education landscape in the twenty-first century; a growing number of proprietary institutions have sought and attained regional accreditation in the U.S., and with the adoption of professional standards and practices commensurate with not-for-profit institutions, proprietary colleges and universities are poised to gain greater acceptance throughout the industry. If for-profit institutions continue to grow their enrollments of lower-income students at the rate they have done in the past, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they will account for 20% of higher education by 2020. Many capable students who now choose proprietary institutions could enroll and thrive in traditional not-for-profit higher education institutions, including the most selective universities and colleges, often at lower cost. Yet the disinclination of traditional universities and colleges to cultivate more capable students from economically and educationally disadvantaged populations has contributed to a sense of bifurcation in the nation's higher education system. Traditional not-for-profit institutions, including the most selective universities and colleges, must exhibit the will to engage more intentionally in transformative education for underserved populations – among other things by devising better means of assessing students' learning potential and reaching out more effectively to students of promise from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A Space for Moral Action

In a number of ways, the college admissions process is one that sorts students into institutions by income and social privilege; as such, it is a system that calcifies disparities between members of different economic and social status. The educational sorting process largely assigns students from the most advantaged backgrounds to selective private institutions that expend the greatest amounts on instruction, while

relegating students of lower income to institutions that are less well funded, causing some to under-match their academic abilities and discouraging others from participating in higher education at all. It is a system that can easily evoke feelings of self-satisfaction and inherent superiority among the most advantaged who gain admission to elite private institutions. Given that over half of those who attain leadership positions in society are graduates of the nation's most selective universities and colleges, one effect of this sorting is to diminish the likelihood of those in the most powerful positions having significant interaction with capable people who have emerged from educational or cultural backgrounds different from their own. As such, some have argued that this system undermines the capacity for empathy and widens the gap between the richest and poorest segments of society.

It is natural to suppose that the higher education sorting system is so pervasive and powerful that no single institution can hope to make positive change. The danger often perceived is that an action taken to align the admission process more closely with core educational values will cause an institution to suffer in the rankings and experience a reduced yield of the most sought-after students. From this perspective, common wisdom would seem to dictate the need to balance mission against the pressures of market; a college or university that acts with no concern for the competitive market forces affecting higher education can jeopardize the financial livelihood that supports its educational and research missions.

Being market-smart, however, does not mean surrendering entirely to the behaviors most conducive to an institution's bottom line. Neither does it imply pitting the institution against every other competitor in a battle for the most highly prized students – a mindset that results in the over-cultivation of students who are already the most advantaged. A wiser approach perceives that unrestrained competitiveness can only result in the tragedy of the commons as each institution pursues its own individual interest, contending for a limited supply of highly advantaged and capable students, regardless of the impact on the broader educational environment. Creating a more effective and meaningful admissions process must begin with the willingness of institutions to move beyond the anarchy of untempered competition – to realize that they have more to gain by cooperating to serve common public interest goals than by uncritically competing according to criteria established by commercial rankings and other entities external to education.

The president in particular must exhibit the courage of leadership to champion the vision of an admissions process that more closely accords with an institution's educational mission and values.

Every college and university works to fulfill its mission within constraints, yet those constraints nonetheless admit some space for moral action. The path to constructive change in the admissions process begins with recognition that any university or college has some discretion to adopt admissions practices that accord more closely with its core educational values. A next step, then, is for an institution to work constructively within that space – while at the same time pursuing strategies to expand it.

Identifying the opportunities for such action might well begin by asking a series of questions that have bearing on the institution's current admissions process. Some questions could concern the impact of the admissions process on high schools and, more particularly, on students applying to college:

- What is the demographic composition of our entering class in terms of ethnicity, educational and economic background?
- What impact does our admission process have on the behavior of high schools in terms of the classes they offer and teaching methods they employ? Do our policies encourage genuine learning and self-improvement or cynicism toward education in high school and college? How do our admission practices affect students' attitudes with regard to cheating or gaming the system?
- How does our admission process affect the attitudes about education that admitted students develop?
- What is the impact on non-admitted students and their parents?
- What is the collective impact of the signals sent by the admissions system, and to what degree does our institution contribute to those signals?

A further set of questions could cast in sharper relief the relationship between an institution's educational mission and the results of its marketing in the admissions process:

- Are our admission practices in line with the educational values we espouse? Do we seek students who have already learned the most or those who could learn most from being here?
- Are there students who could learn more from being here if the institution changed some of its behaviors – in its admissions practices and its programs of learning?
- Do we attract primarily students who seek to prepare themselves for socially valuable work in such careers as education, social work, or nursing – or students who are mainly interested in highly remunerative careers that benefit their individual well-being in highest degree?
- To what extent can ethical considerations be regarded as secondary to the interest of financial stability and status?

The answers to such questions as these begin to define the space for moral action available to a college or university – and to suggest the pathways an institution could pursue in fulfilling its mission more completely. For any of these questions to gain traction in an institution, the senior administrative leadership must put them forward with public conviction as matters of genuine consequence. The president in particular must exhibit the courage of leadership to champion the vision of an admissions process that more closely accords with an institution's

educational mission and values. For many institutions, leadership of this kind would entail a serious consideration of what purposes are being served by enlisting as a full combatant in the admissions arms race. It would mean confronting the question of whether the battle to win a greater share of the most highly prized educationally and economically advantaged students serves the interests of the region, state, or the nation – or if it serves primarily the interests of the institution itself as reflected in the competitive external rankings. For an institution to diverge from the competitive instinct to pursue greater selectivity and prestige involves considerable risk, and no president would undertake this course without the support of key trustees as well. Moving an institution to a state of moral action requires the sustained motivation of an institution's senior administrative leadership and its governing board.

Many of the questions posed above, and the possible answers that could arise, have considerable importance to the faculty of a university or college. Faculty members can exert very strong influence in moving an institution toward the fulfillment of its mission with greater integrity, even if some of those actions occur at the expense of the bottom line. Faculty members with tenure have remarkable discretion within their institutions; in some respects faculty have even greater power than administrators to motivate changes within their institution that result in enhanced mission fulfillment. While faculty members may incline most often to use their freedom for individual advantage, a concerted movement within the faculty to make more appropriate use of standardized test scores as admissions criteria, for example, or to admit more students from less advantaged educational and economic backgrounds could have a compelling and beneficial impact on an institution's learning environment.

One of the most important actions that a university or college can take within the space for moral action is to increase the emphasis on successful learning as a central and pervasive purpose of the academy.

Faculty members also have unique power to focus the institution's energy on improving the quality of student learning. One of the most counterproductive impacts of the higher education admissions process is to undermine the value of learning itself as the core element of a college or university's mission. The highly competitive elements of the admissions process create cynical a mindset for many students in which being accepted comes to seem more important than the personal growth, expanded understanding, and humility that result from a rigorous engagement with a body of knowledge. It is sometimes observed that

faculty members are complicit in creating an environment that assigns secondary importance to the quality of learning in the educational sorting process. The academic reward system confers greater value on the production of knowledge and publication than on successful teaching and learning, particularly in major research universities, but also increasingly in institutions that were founded with a primary mission to teach. Within this culture faculty members often find that they have no particular incentive to teach well. Some faculty members in ironic candor will invoke a tenet of the Hippocratic Oath in describing their institution's fulfillment of the learning mission: "We do our best to recruit talented and motivated students, and in four years we can justly claim that we do them no harm."

As the cost of higher education continues to rise, there is growing pressure on colleges and universities of every kind to increase student success in learning, and to develop more substantive and meaningful measures to gauge the learning that has occurred. The press to hold institutions more accountable for the quality of student learning has been a central element of K- 12 education for the past 30 years, and through the last decade in particular. The effect of the No Child Left Behind legislation has been to raise national awareness of this issue and create a climate of accountability for improved student learning in schools. As result there has been an intensified focus on the quality of teaching as well as on methods for training and evaluating teachers. In higher education the traditional hedge to assessing the knowledge and skills that students gain through the curriculum is to measure student persistence and graduation rates – an approach that inherently favors selective institutions that enroll the most advantaged and highly motivated students while punishing those that educate less advantaged students.

Yet as federal and state policymakers become increasingly focused on the value conferred by higher education's programs, the call for greater accountability even within selective institutions is becoming more pointed. In concert with cost increases and budgetary constrictions, the questions about higher education's effectiveness in instilling student learning will certainly contribute to an environment of heightened scrutiny and accountability for universities and colleges of every kind. The higher education lobby recently succeeded in defeating federal passage of a Student Unit Record System, which would have made it possible to track student progress through the curriculum, including a focus on individual students, courses, and professors. Though this particular proposal has been defeated in the legislative process, it will not likely be the last expression of public demand for better measures of learning and better institutional progress in helping students learn successfully in higher education institutions.

One of the most important actions that a university or college can take within the space for moral action is to increase the emphasis on successful learning as a central and pervasive purpose of the academy. No one is more suitably positioned to exert leadership on this issue within their own institutions than the faculty. Faculty members are uniquely positioned to assert the power of institutional mission to emphasize genuine achievement in learning during the college years.

Collective Actions

While there is space for moral action within individual colleges and universities, the likelihood of achieving significant change in higher education admissions will also require a substantial coordination of efforts. Gaining traction for an admissions process that is more equitable and less disruptive to the lives of young people may begin with the efforts of state university and college systems, national and regional associations of higher education institutions, and other entities that can affect the practices of multiple institutions in a state or region. For decades the California Master Plan exemplified a model of collective action through which the state sought to ensure all of its residents the opportunity to pursue higher education – in the state’s community college system, the California State University, the University of California, or one of several independent institutions, depending on a student’s academic achievement in high school. While the state has ultimately been unable to fund the promise extended through the Master Plan, this model nonetheless exemplifies the potential of collective action to address a major societal challenge and equip a population for the educational demands of a changing world.

Cooperative action could also yield a more educationally appropriate experience applying to highly selective independent institutions. The competition among students for admission to the most selective private universities has reached a point at which one can sincerely question what value the process adds to society. Finding ways to mitigate the intense pressures of competition through cooperative approaches could realize a benefit for students and institutions alike.

One possible scenario for collective action would be for a group of selective institutions to agree to accept some agreed-upon number of their applicants to a common pool. Students admitted to this pool would have attained a collectively defined threshold of achievement, as indicated for example through a combination of high school grades and commonly developed subject tests. These students would be guaranteed admission to at least one of the cooperating set of institutions, and those who were offered admission to their first-choice institution would need to agree to enroll or withdraw to make space available to another student in the admitted pool. A student who was accepted to the common pool but not offered admission by his or her top choice could choose an offer of admission by one of the other institutions that has invited the student to enroll; or the student could choose to decline the offers received and leave the pool, making room for others who seek consideration through this collective admission process.

Selective and well endowed institutions could help relieve the problem of limited supply by committing some of their resources to expanding capacity.

As in any cooperative undertaking, the process would require all parties to give up some things that they enjoy; at the same time the process could confer mutual advantages. Institutions could lose some bragging rights through this process, which could be offset by the good will from their contribution to reducing the destructive anxiety of many students in the application process. Students would benefit from reduced stress and be less distracted from their studies in the final year of high school. This scenario resembles in some respects the system by which Greek organizations give bids to pledges or medical students receive invitations to residencies during the final stage of their training. Certainly the idea presented here is not fully developed, but it serves as an example of how selective institutions might work collaboratively in some aspects of the admissions process. A skeptic might argue that the recent actions of Princeton and Harvard to reinstate their early admission programs (following the University of Virginia’s similar decision) do not augur well for the long-term success of collective institutional actions to achieve a fairer, more socially progressive admissions process. Selective institutions that elected to participate in the kind of arrangement described here would need to work carefully through the details, being attentive to unintended consequences. Yet a basic agreement among highly selective institutions to work cooperatively in considering the cohort of applicants for admission could offer one step toward an application process that is more conducive to eliciting positive attitudes about college education as a process of genuine learning and self-development.

There are some for whom the very thought of selective universities and colleges working together in making admission decisions invokes memories of the federal government’s anti-trust suit of 1989, which accused several institutions of the Ivy League and other selective universities of working in collusion to fix tuition prices. The difference between that circumstance and the scenario suggested here is that a cooperative approach among institutions in offering acceptance to admission has nothing to do with the price being charged to students. Too often the specter of this anti-trust suit has stifled any serious consideration of cooperative actions that could bring about an improvement of the admissions process for students applying to the most selective institutions. Agreements that serve the educational mission of each participating institution and further the public interest could certainly be promoted as not falling under the purview of antitrust. If selective institutions were to work collectively in this way to expand the space for moral action available to them, the results could have a disproportionate impact on all of higher education.

Another action that the nation’s highly selective and best endowed institutions could take to defuse some of the intense competition and frustration of this process is to expand in size, creating the capacity to admit more students. No university in itself can meet the nation’s

pervasive need to produce more college graduates. Given the severity of their budget constraints, most public universities and colleges have little if any ability to grow larger. Through the past decade most of the growth in higher education has occurred in the for-profit sector.

Students seeking admission to the nation's most selective institutions face the challenge of severely limited capacity. The conundrum is that a large number of highly capable and motivated students apply for admission to a comparatively small number of universities and colleges with intensely competitive admissions. Because demand greatly exceeds supply in these selective institutions, a significant number of capable and accomplished students are turned away, though their qualifications are virtually on a par with the admitted class.

It is not possible to solve this problem by creating new institutions of the stature of the most prestigious institutions. Academic reputation is a quality that accrues over time and cannot be conferred in a single stroke. While it is impossible to build new institutions with the historical tradition and appeal of the most competitive universities and colleges, these selective and wellendowed institutions could help relieve the problem of limited supply by committing some of their resources to expanding capacity. All of the most highly regarded universities and colleges have discretionary resources that could be used to increase their size. Using their resources in this way could send an important signal that the nation's wealthiest and most selective universities and colleges are committed to expanding access to higher education.

Toward Better Results

Working together represents the best, and possibly the only hope of creating an admissions system that better supports the public purposes of higher education.

For the nation's colleges and universities to expand the space for moral action, there must be a broadly shared commitment to work together in creating a higher education admissions process that better reflects the educational values common to all institutions. It will require a collective commitment among all types of universities and colleges to move beyond the negative elements of the admissions experience – and to design an admissions system that helps instill a sense of genuine excitement in students at the power of higher education to bring about

a transformation, regardless of where one begins on the scale of income or educational background. Working together represents the best, and possibly the only hope of creating an admissions system that better supports the public purposes of higher education. Given the enormity of the educational challenges confronting the nation, universities and colleges must come to regard themselves not as feudal fiefdoms but as integrally linked nodes in a network of shared educational purposes. Professional associations, including the National Association of College Admission Counselors, the College Board, and many others can serve important roles in raising the level of thinking and action among institutions. Higher education associations can be leading forces in helping define the path to constructive change, elevating the conversation beyond immediate self-interest to ask: *What things are you willing to give up as an institution in order to achieve a more equitable and less disconcerting system of higher education admissions?*

Bringing about constructive change will require courage of leadership. Faculty members can exert a significant influence in their own institutions by calling for a student body that more closely reflects the diversity of excellence among the nation's college-attending population. Courageous faculty action would consist of leading the charge to recruit incoming classes of students who may score less well on standard measures but add valuable qualities to their academic communities while offering more interesting possibilities for effective teaching and learning. Leadership of this kind from the faculty can help empower admissions officers who are otherwise in the direct line of fire for enrolling a class that conforms as closely as possible to the most ideal qualities as identified in the competitive marketplace and media hype.

Admissions officers cannot bring about a change in the educational sorting process without the support of their institutions' senior leadership: chief academic officers, chief financial officers, directors of financial aid, and most importantly, presidents. There are few higher education institutions that lack the resources necessary to make positive change in the admissions process; what is most often lacking is the will to change among the top leadership. Presidents cannot be missing in action on this agenda. As principal officers of their institutions, they must take the lead in a process of educating the public, demonstrating through clear thinking and straight talk the value of pursuing a different approach to college admissions, beginning with the most selective universities and colleges. Presidents of these institutions need to occupy the foreground in explaining to the public, to students and parents, and to the media why, for example, the number of applications received or the number of students turned away are not good measures of educational quality or of the suitability of a particular institution for a given student. Presidents must also model the courage to lead their institutions in actions that contribute greater educational value to society, even if those actions do not enhance the bottom line. Finally, presidents must demonstrate the courage to work collectively with other institutions in taking actions that make the college admissions process more of a positive experience of self-discovery and informed choice, less of an ordeal that generates self-doubt and cynicism toward education in general. As a formative process for students, college admissions would be more valuable for all stakeholders if it exemplified the best that education has to offer.

There are several actions under two broad rubrics that selective universities and colleges could agree to take collectively that would create pathways to better results in the admission process:

Measure Things that Matter

- **Align the use of standardized tests with their real (documented) value.** We endorse the fundamental recommendation made by the National Association of College Admission Counselors in its report, *College Admissions Testing*: that is, to make appropriate and responsible use of standardized test scores in the admissions process, and to place student test scores in a context that highlights their verifiable value. Higher education institutions as well as high school guidance counselors should use test scores in ways that contribute most productively to the college choice process, and that help students regard college choice as part of the learning, reflection, and self-discovery that results from a college education itself. Higher education institutions that choose to require the SAT or ACT should ask themselves: What is our purpose in using these tests? What educational values do we think the test scores convey beyond what high school grades express? How well do the test scores measure the qualities in students that we seek to know? Institutions that make standardized test scores optional to the admissions process should decline to report the test scores they have received to ranking agencies, for the simple reason that only students who score well will furnish their scores, producing an inflated measure.
- **Help the public understand that selectivity in itself is not a proxy for the quality of education a student attains.** The combination of aggressive marketing and a disproportionate focus of media attention on elite institutions can reinforce mistaken impressions that selectivity in itself is a measure of quality teaching and learning. Universities and colleges must help students and their parents understand that the quality of education results from a suitable alignment of a student's interests and goals with the faculty and programs an institution offers.
- **Develop measures in addition to persistence and graduation rates to express an institution's impact on student learning.** In themselves these measures fail to convey the fuller dimensions of what students learn and how their college education has impacted their lives, while too often failing to take account of differences in the educational and economic background of students. Employ measures such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to gauge student developmental progress and engagement through the undergraduate career.
- **Develop and apply measures of academic progress and success within the academic major as well as general education,** including skills of critical thinking and expression, problem solving, and the ability to transfer knowledge and modes of thinking across fields of study.
- **Find ways to express the contribution a higher education institution makes to a student's learning, development, and maturity – including contributions that may not be easily quantifiable.** Higher education institutions should be asking themselves a range of questions about the lives and families they have changed. Some of these include: How many first-generation students have we recruited, matriculated, nurtured, and graduated? How many low-income students? What knowledge have they gained? What habits of mind have they developed? What skills have they mastered in the application of their newfound knowledge and habits of mind? How many and what proportion of our students have international experiences, engage in research, serve the community, pursue interdisciplinary study, and receive individualized advising? Do they think, write, and speak critically, nimbly, and effectively? Do they demonstrate a keen interest in learning? Do they stimulate the thinking of one another and their instructors? Do student evaluations indicate that professors demonstrate and communicate a keen interest in the subject matter? A willingness to ask questions of this sort is a first step to focus the institution's energy on improving its effectiveness in areas of weakness.
- **Develop and implement methods beyond the student course evaluation to gauge effective teaching,** and use the results of these findings to make teaching a topic of sustained attention among faculty; recast the academic reward structure to make effective teaching more central to tenure and promotion.
- **Calibrate the number of students who enter different professions and careers following graduation,** not just the alumni who attain distinguished leadership positions in the most lucrative professions, but also those who serve in lower-paying careers such as teaching, social work, and nursing, which also contribute significant value to society.

Employ Practices that Contribute to the Public Interest

- **Curtail or eliminate the practice of awarding institutional merit aid to students at the expense of assisting students with financial need.** Consider how the practice of awarding aid in excess of need incites bidding wars that negatively affect both institutions and students. While the use of merit awards or tuition discounting in judicious measure can be an effective strategy for attracting some students who ultimately pay a substantial share of their college education costs, in awarding increasing shares of financial aid budgets to students without financial need, higher education institutions effectively divert a substantial amount of funds away from students for whom financial aid can make the difference between attending and not attending college. Subsidizing those who can afford college also reduces system-wide revenue. Institutions should consider the practice of limiting the proportion of the incoming class that receives merit-based aid.
- **Take the risk of admitting more students who show educational promise outside the standard metrics used to gauge institutional selectivity.** Institutions are more often prone to take risks on legacy admits or athletic admits than on students who show promise outside the traditional academic parameters of suitability for admission. Selective institutions must work to extricate privilege from the definition of academic merit.

- **Adopt a school.** Colleges and universities of all kinds, including the most selective institutions, should commit themselves to work in close conjunction with administrators and teachers of a local high school or district, particularly schools within lower-income settings in which students may lack opportunities to understand the value of higher education or know what courses offer the best preparation for college success. The University of Southern California provides an exemplar of this kind of engagement with public schools in the City of Los Angeles; the benefit that results from that university school engagement extends beyond the impact on students who ultimately attend the University itself. Generating interest and excitement about learning, personal growth, and advancement in young people is the responsibility of every higher education institution. Selective higher education institutions cannot smugly ignore students who have had fewer educational advantages with the claim that “that is not our market.” Benefiting the nation’s lower-income, first generation, and minority students is part of the educational mission shared by every higher education institution.
- **Consider the development of collaborative admission models** to help alleviate some of the destructive anxiety students experience in applying to selective universities and colleges. A willingness of the most selective institutions to work together in ways that make the admissions process less of a frenetic and negative experience would send an important signal to all of higher education. What is needed is an admission process that affirms and reinforces the values of curiosity, humility, discovery, and growth in young people – both in the search for a college and in the course of a college education. The example of a cooperative admissions process as sketched above is only one potential model for a more collaborative approach among selective institutions.
- **Commit to a judicious growth in the size of selective institutions to accommodate intensive demand.** The nation’s wealthiest and most selective institutions can relieve some stress in the competitive admissions market by growing in size and increasing the number of faculty and students in their academic communities, thereby reducing in some degree the number of accomplished and promising applicants who are turned away.
- **Collaborate with a range of higher education institutions to convey the importance of students choosing a university or college that seems to be a good educational match.** Participate in college fairs and other events that allow prospective students to understand different kinds of institutions and the distinctive qualities of each.
- **Commit to a practice of not sending marketing materials to students who have a very small chance of being admitted to a selective institution.** Selective institutions need to wean themselves of the practice of soliciting long-shot applications from students who will almost certainly be turned down and become a statistic in the institution’s selectivity ratio. Raising the hopes of students only to exploit them in this way does a disservice to students beyond the initial disappointment of being denied admission; for some it could create a sense of alienation that inhibits the aspiration to attend any university or college.
- **Decline to participate in perception-based rankings of higher education institutions.** Nothing short of widespread collective action can break the throttle grip that marketdriven external entities exert on the practices of universities and colleges. A combined action by the nation’s selective institutions not to furnish information to ranking organizations would send a signal that students should seek beyond selectivity or resource measures to determine what matters most to them in a college – at the same time it would allow institutions to redirect more staff time and resources to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning.
- **Work collectively to convey that not being admitted to a highly selective institution is not a condemning judgment about a student’s educational potential or value as a human being.** Selective institutions should work together in communicating that the number of applicants greatly exceeds the number of openings, and that the qualifications of many applicants are so consistently strong that some students with virtually identical strengths and potential will have different results. Applicants need to be equipped to respond to an acceptance notice with humility, and to experience a rejection without the loss of all hope and self-esteem.

A Tempered Competitiveness

Creating a college admissions process that contributes more directly to the nation’s public interests will require an altered mindset in the leadership of higher education institutions. It will be necessary to hold in abeyance some of the spirit that conceives success in college admissions as prevailing over the competition at any cost, and to ask whether the increasing drive to selectivity and mass appeal is exacerbating the inequalities that raised the educational stakes in the first place. The goal needs to become something larger than assembling an incoming class of stellar Olympians whose entry credentials help the institution to shine in the college rankings. Institutions and their leaders must come to view the admissions process from a perspective beyond the narcissistic glass of competitive rankings, and to see themselves as others see them – to recognize themselves as part of a larger system of institutions that make up the terrain of college choice. Adopting this perspective requires that institutions ask different kinds of questions: What opportunities for deeper cultural interaction and understanding might have occurred? What better attitudes toward the value of learning and achievement might have taken root, and what beneficial results might have come about from admitting more students with promising credentials outside the standard metrics of selectivity? What students whom we admitted might have done better in another setting? How can college admissions better reflect and serve educational values?

No one expects that higher education institutions and their admissions officers will relinquish their competitive spirit altogether. But in agreeing to work cooperatively on some common challenges – by tempering some of the most fiercely competitive instincts in building its cohort of admitted students, a selective institution takes a step into closer alignment with the broader public purposes to be achieved through higher education. As a nation we do a profound disservice to our own future by supposing that our investments in human capital should focus so intently on advancing those of privilege and

wealth at the expense of those who are less advantaged. Selective universities and colleges must work together in adopting enrollment management practices that serve the public interest in more effective ways. In taking this step, higher education can make important strides in shaping the nation's class for the decades ahead.

This summary essay was written by Gregory R. Wegner of the Great Lakes Colleges Association; Lloyd Thacker of the Education Conservancy, and Jerome A. Lucido and Scott Andrew Schulz, both of the University of Southern California Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Wednesday, January 26

5:00 p.m. Registration and Cocktail Reception at the Cathedral of St. Vibiana
Opening Address College Admissions: Do We Do What We Say We Do?
Andrew Delbanco,
Columbia University

6:00 p.m. Cocktail Reception at the California Club
7:00 p.m. Dinner at the California Club
Welcome
Elizabeth Garrett, Provost,
University of Southern California
Keynote Address: Why America Cannot Wait for Change in College Admissions
Roberto Rodriguez,
White House Education Advisor

Thursday, January 27

7:30 a.m. Continental Breakfast at the Omni Hotel
8:15 a.m. Welcome
C. L. Max Nikias, President,
University of Southern California
8:30 a.m. Keynote Address: Defining Our Collective Charge
Robert Zemsky,
University of Pennsylvania
9:00 a.m. Question and Answer Session
9:30 a.m. Break
9:45 a.m. Session I – The Case for Change from the Perspectives of Educational Scholars: What We Do, Why, and With What Results
Question and Answer Session
11:00 a.m. Break
11:30 a.m. Luncheon
12:15 p.m. Keynote Address: Sorting to Extremes: An Economic Analysis
Michael McPherson,
Spencer Foundation
Sandy Baum,
Skidmore College
1:00 p.m. Question and Answer Session
1:30 p.m. Break
1:45 p.m. Master Class: Ethical Exigencies and Opportunities: The Space for Moral Action
Harry Brighouse,
University of Wisconsin
2:30 p.m. Question and Answer Session
3:00 p.m. Idea Harvesting Session
Jeffrey Brenzel,
Yale University
4:00 p.m. Adjourn

Friday, January 28

7:45 a.m. Continental Breakfast at the Omni hotel
8:15 a.m. Session II – Laying the Framework for Change in College Admissions: The Perspective of Enrollment Professionals
Question and Answer Session
9:00 a.m. Break
9:30 a.m. Session III – Laying the Framework for Change in College Admissions: Individual, Collective, Legal and Leadership Considerations
Question and Answer Session
9:45 a.m. Closing Remarks and Summary: Next Steps in Developing an Action Plan for Change
Jerry Lucido,
Executive Director
USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice
Lloyd Thacker,
Education Conservancy
11:00 a.m. Question and Answer Session
11:30 a.m. Closing Remarks and Summary: Next Steps in Developing an Action Plan for Change
Jerry Lucido,
Executive Director
USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice
Lloyd Thacker,
Education Conservancy
12:00 p.m. Adjourn

Sorting To Extremes

by *Sandy Baum and Michael S. McPherson*

The world of higher education is a world of sorting, selecting, and ranking—on both sides of the market. Colleges select students to recruit and then to admit; students choose where to apply and which offer to accept. The sorting process that gets the most attention is in the higher reaches of the market, where it's not too much to say that everybody is ranking and comparing all the time. Viewed from the outside, the activity at the high end, which we call the Little Sort, has a breathless, almost frenzied quality—the stuff, these days, of novels and New Yorker cartoons.

The more significant sorting, though—the one that has a major impact on the lives of many students and on the character of the inequality in American society—is a process most people take for granted. This Big Sort sends young people from low-income families, or those with parents who did not go to college, to community colleges or for-profit institutions—or to the military, or straight into the labor force. Meanwhile, it sends the most talented and generally the most privileged children into the competitive Little Sort.

The extreme and in our view irrational mania for sorting among elite students and institutions is worthy of attention. It wastes valuable financial and human resources and causes damaging levels of stress in some of our most talented young people, while encouraging them to engage in activities that do more harm than good to their emotional and intellectual development. Moreover, the current pressures on public higher education to become more selective in an attempt to move up in the prestige hierarchy threaten to make the frenzy spread to a much larger segment of the market.

But frenzied competition does not reflect the experience of most students or most postsecondary institutions. It's still true that a large fraction of people attending college apply and get in to exactly one institution. In the background of the attention-getting Little Sort that allocates star students among elite places, the Big Sort involves a set of forces working outside the spotlight that wind up determining which students have a plethora of choices about which college to go to and which have few choices or, too often, none at all.

The Big Sort

In 1960, Clark Kerr helped to advance a framework for mass higher education in California—the famous Master Plan—whose basic features have shaped public higher education in most states since. In Kerr's elegant plan, the top third of high school students, as measured by test scores and grades, would be admissible to a four-year college or university, while all other high school graduates could attend a two-year community college. The top third in turn were sorted into the University of California or the California State University (then College) system, depending on whether or not they ranked in the top 12 percent of the population of new high school graduates. Most states lack this much formulaic clarity in their sorting systems (and the California system has become more complicated over time), but the tripartite division within public systems is now nearly universal.

It's hard to argue with the basic logic of this kind of Big Sort. Students have different interests, preparation, motivation, and levels of intellectual engagement. Postsecondary education should not be one-size-fits-all. It makes intuitive sense that students who show more academic promise in high school should go to school longer and that the state should invest more in them than in other students. A selective sorting process, other things being equal, appears both efficient and equitable. But (and it's a big but) other things aren't anywhere near equal. The odds that a student from a low-income family, or from one in which neither parent is a college graduate, will qualify for admission to a selective college or university are far lower than they are for those from more affluent and educated families. Even among high school graduates with similar academic qualifications, the sorting process leads to dramatically different outcomes depending on family background.

Indeed, the likelihood that those first-generation or lower-income students who do have a good chance of admission to a selective college or university will even apply is quite low. And recent research makes clear that missing out on attendance at a more selective college substantially reduces the likelihood of winding up with a bachelor's degree.

The Big Sort as it exists in the United States is shot through with the unfair consequences of highly—and increasingly—unequal economic and pre-collegiate educational systems. The impoverished educational opportunities offered to disadvantaged students at home, in their neighborhoods, and in their schools ensure that they will typically emerge from high school less well prepared to succeed at college than other students are. They are also ill-equipped to make the choices that will increase their likelihood of having the educational opportunities that are most likely to boost their chances for long-run success. Fixing or at least ameliorating these devastating inequalities is a vital problem of justice for our society.

But even in the context of dramatic inequalities in the circumstances and opportunities of young people, more could be done to diminish the

chasm between the postsecondary experiences (or lack of experiences) of people from different backgrounds. We could be sure that both the information and the funding to support the most appropriate educational choices for each individual are universally available. We could provide the necessary resources to ensure that students with inadequate academic preparation can become college-ready in a system that currently makes college success for these students virtually unattainable.

A discussion that does justice to potential creative solutions to these fundamental problems is beyond the scope of this essay. But we should keep the issues at the front of our minds as we focus on the less compelling but still destructive problem of the Little Sort.

The Little Sort

There is not a bright line between the problems of the Big Sort and those of the Little Sort, because the highly selective colleges and universities don't manage to enroll even as many "qualified" low-income and first-generation students as they should. According to research by Catherine Hill and Gordon Winston, in 2003 only 10 percent of students in the most selective colleges and universities came from the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution. At the same time, 12.5 percent of the students with SAT (or equivalent ACT) scores of 1250 or higher came from this population. These are all students who have at least considered enrolling in a somewhat selective four-year college and who are likely to be qualified for admission. Elite colleges should strengthen their efforts to enroll these students.

Beyond this question of broadening the range of backgrounds in the student body, the Little Sort in colleges like Williams, Middlebury, Princeton, and Brown raises issues of a different kind. It's hard to believe that it matters very much to society exactly which students end up in which places at the high end, but the current process of matching students and institutions generates a dynamic that is wasteful and destructive.

The underlying force driving this dynamic is what economists call "positional competition," a contest in which the aim is not to achieve some independently defined goal—like finishing a marathon in under four hours—but a goal that depends on a ranking, a place in line, like finishing a marathon in the top ten. Sports are in fact an excellent metaphor for this kind of positional competition.

Another example was developed by Tom Schelling. Imagine a world, which may in fact not be far in the future, where parents can influence the height of their children through genetic manipulation. How tall would you want your son to be? Schelling suggests most people would not want a very tall son or a very short one. Probably most people would aim for a son whose height was a little above average. But if most people made that choice, the next generation would be a little taller than the present generation, and to satisfy your positional preference you'd want a son a little taller than that. And so on. As the years passed, men's average height would grow without limit until we became a race of giants—an outcome that virtually nobody wants or would ever deliberately choose. (Economist Robert Frank has written extensively on such positional competition, including in higher education.)

The athletic arms races in which selective colleges are involved are not so different from these other examples. Colleges that don't award athletic scholarships or make any money from sports probably don't feel they have to have the best teams, but they fear being below average. So they keep raising the intensity (and costs) of their athletic programs as their competitors do the same. So the average is a moving target. The athletic competition is attracting criticism for siphoning resources from activities more central to the academic mission. But competition for students with higher test scores, more extra-curricular activities, and more outstanding recommendations is similar.

The dynamic is even more powerful because both sides of the market have positional aims. A college that wants to move up in the rankings aims at improving the measured quality of its admitted students just enough to get ahead of its rivals. But as the rivals below strive to move up, each college has to ramp up a bit just to stay in the same place.

On the other side of the market, students don't need to be aiming to be the best in the world; they (and their parents) may just want to hit that ever-rising threshold for a top-10 or a top-20 institution, according to any of several similar ranking systems. But that means getting a little bit ahead of the other high school seniors with similar goals. As these students push ahead, the colleges in turn have to decide who among those who would have qualified last year are no longer good enough to make the cut—and the wheel turns again.

Now obviously some of the things that colleges and students do to improve their credentials are of real value to the colleges, to the students, and to society. When colleges with too many large classes reduce class size or create more quiet spaces for study, that's a win all around. Up to some point, better residential accommodation and recreational facilities also add real value. And when students improve their study habits in high school and take more demanding courses that expand their capacities, that's terrific.

But as the process continues, further improvements run into decreasing and maybe even negative returns. Competition-driven amenities that have more to do with impressing applicants than with enriching education can become both wasteful and distracting. Students may add more to their stress levels than to their learning when they feel pressed to take every AP class in sight; the enormous pressure to look good on paper may also cause students to pass on the valuable experience of tackling a subject or project that might lead to failure. And despite their concern

for socioeconomic diversity, colleges find themselves rewarding students for multiple summers building houses in developing countries, for musical accomplishments that would be impossible without expensive lessons, and for extra-curricular activities available only in well-resourced high schools.

Any college that turns down a significant number of applicants who are able to do the work is in some measure engaged in this dynamic. But the share of the competitive behaviors that are wasteful or destructive almost certainly increases as you move toward the more elite end of the market. The plausible candidates for admission at Williams or Princeton are terrific secondary students, with strong academic records and great achievements in public service, athletics, literary works, or all of the above. And the top universities and colleges, even after the recent endowment woes, are spending breathtaking amounts of money on every undergraduate they enroll. They are rejecting students who would likely be stars, while they spend more and more on the lucky few without measurably increasing the quality of their educational experiences.

This unhealthy ratcheting is a result of competition, and competition is supposed to be good for both consumers and producers. So what's wrong? In a market where firms are trying to be #1 but consumers are just looking for value, producers who embellish their products with frills that don't add utility lose customers. But as the markets for luxury products reveal, in some cases consumers are buying not just products but the status those products bring. If students and parents were just looking for the best education for the price, they might eschew colleges that waste resources. But they are also looking for status.

It would seem that some prestigious colleges would see an opening for attracting the high-quality students who are looking for value. But the risk of losing prestige that a single institution would take in focusing on value is too great. Moreover, the top-ranked students tend to come from families for whom a few thousand dollars more to get a more-prestigious degree is worth it. And of course the "Chivas Regal effect" is powerful: more expensive means better, particularly because it is so difficult to measure "better" in this market.

Another factor limiting the extent to which competition in this market can be constructive is the fixed supply of places in prestigious institutions. In competitive markets, new firms can enter when they see excess profits and the potential for meeting consumer needs at lower cost. But it's virtually impossible to create a new college at the top of the rankings. The top institutions have powerful reputations that have been earned over many years. They have impressive lists of alumni. And they have sky-high endowments. It is difficult for a college in 11th or 12th place to move into the top ten. The idea of a new, innovative institution doing that is almost unimaginable. And, of course, as long as the competition is about relative position in a ranking, when a new player squeezes in, somebody else is squeezed out. The names change, but the game goes on.

Further down the food chain, strong colleges and strong students are more likely to have headroom for genuine improvement—even though the competitive dynamic rewards excessive attention to what is easiest to measure, count, or see on a campus tour.

If we could be confident that this phenomenon, at least in its more excessive forms, would stay confined to the relatively boutique-y world of the top students and colleges, improving matters might be ranked as a relatively low-priority problem. But there is reason to worry that this is a virus that will spread.

The presidents of flagship public universities are very focused on positional competition. The great majority seem to share the goal of being (or staying) in the top twenty. Of course score is kept in many ways other than the quality of undergraduate students, notably including research dollars, rankings of graduate programs, and contributions to local economic development. But as state funding dries up, these universities have less political pressure to serve the needs of the broad state population; they find more rewards in impressing donors, recruiting out-of-state students who bring in more tuition and often better credentials, and appearing in the same lists of prestigious places for an undergraduate education as the elite privates.

This strategy makes a good deal of sense for these universities considered one at a time (at least if you put in brackets their fidelity to the historic mission of land-grant universities), but it could not be more obvious that getting into the top-twenty public universities is an aim that is collectively self-defeating for the well over fifty institutions that consider themselves candidates for this status.

It is easy to write off as socially meaningless the question of which students go to Amherst and which go to Vassar. In contrast, the efforts to increase the number of low-income and first-generation students who go to elite colleges and universities—and to reduce the role of legacy status or athletic accomplishment in increasing chances for admission—have the potential to improve the equity of the system and of society in general, and certainly to dramatically improve the lives of some deserving individuals.

Yet modifying these outcomes won't touch the large-scale inequities in postsecondary opportunities in this country. As flagship public universities turn down more and more qualified in-state students and focus increasingly on prestige, there is the potential for the frenetic,

status-oriented competition at the upper end of the postsecondary system to endanger the successes we have had in broadening and deepening the role of higher education.

In other words, failure to mitigate the frenetic and wasteful admissions competition may have more serious implications than we realize.

What Is To Be Done?

There is a relentless logic to the two-sided arms race driving the Little Sort that is peculiarly hard to overcome. Simply pointing out that a top-twenty strategy is collectively self-defeating will not curtail pursuit of such a positional goal among public universities, any more than it has that effect on the private universities and colleges with similar goals.

As the example of parents' choosing their children's height suggests, players in the admissions game don't have to make absolute success their first priority – they just need to seek out a modest advantage compared to their nearest rivals. Every president understands that she can't step out of the rat race and just stay put—as others continue to strive, her university or college will inexorably fall behind.

This logic implies that restraining the destructive aspects of this competition requires cooperation among institutions. This is how professional sports leagues restrain wage competition for players. The college draft and salary caps derive from enforceable agreements that keep teams' bidding wars under control. The obvious problem with such agreements is the threat of anti-trust litigation. Remarkably, Congress voted an explicit exemption for organized baseball, while the other major sports rely on enforcement through union contracts, which are protected under existing anti-trust law.

Might elite colleges and universities similarly enter into enforceable agreements to limit competition for students? The track record is not promising. The one clear example of colleges agreeing to restrain competition was the set of “overlap” agreements about financial aid offers across groups of colleges, which aimed to curtail merit-aid bidding wars for desirable students. These agreements provoked an anti-trust prosecution and, although a clear finding of legal violation was never reached (the case ended in a settlement), colleges have been understandably gun-shy about cooperative agreements ever since.

In our view, it would be highly desirable for Congress to provide protection from anti-trust violation for agreements among colleges to restrain socially unproductive positional competition. Admissions officers, for example, should not have to worry about legal jeopardy if they agree to limit the number of Advanced Placement results that can count in students' admissions records. Universities should similarly be able to adopt common constraints on investments in upgraded athletic and recreational facilities, as well as limits on merit-aid offers. Lines would need to be drawn carefully and practices would need to be monitored, but the current assumption that maximum market competition among these non-commercial institutions is always socially desirable is quite unjustified.

Is there any way to make progress short of gaining anti-trust protection? It isn't easy, but some things might be tried.

Our first suggestion arises from noting that a better matching system for students and selective colleges seems almost inevitable in this computer age. A generation ago, it would have been hard to imagine that so many people would be meeting their partners on line after filling out forms reporting their salient characteristics and those of their ideal matches. Travelers now can similarly benefit from aggregation sites like Kayak.com that let them compare air-travel and hotel offers from hundreds of brands at once.

The potential efficiency gains of relieving admissions officers of reading the applications of hundreds of students who are not seriously considering enrolling – and of relieving students from applying to more and more institutions to cover their bets – are large. Evolution toward a more coordinated and efficient admissions processing system across institutions might, if developed on the right lines, provide a vehicle for moderating the destructive aspects of the current competition. The “common application” is an early and relatively low-tech illustration of this trend.

Suppose, to illustrate, that either a third party or a consortium of colleges invited students to apply to a set of institutions as a group, listing their preferences among the colleges. (The University of California system functions in roughly this fashion now.) To invite applicants, a consortium would need to assemble an attractive package of options, in much the same way that students are now encouraged to apply to “stretch” and “safety” schools.

Consortia might make certain commitments to students (for example, guaranteeing admission somewhere in the consortium to all applicants who meet specified requirements) or require certain pre-commitments from them (such as the promise to accept admission to any of their top two or three choices). If this approach caught on, competition would come to take place among consortia more than among individual institutions and might result in a more rational and less frenetic marketplace.

Another potential solution elicits powerful negative reactions from many of the guardians of selectivity—but some signs of movement and a few quieter nods of understanding encourage us to put it forward. There is of course no possibility of easing the competition for a place in a top-ten institution by adding more institutions to the top ten. But what about making the enrollments of the top ten bigger?

When Toyota sees increased demand for Lexus, they expand production. Of course they wouldn't want everyone to drive a Lexus, because the prestige factor would be lost. But there is some room for increased supply of positional goods in an environment where the population is growing and where models are being added at the lower end of the hierarchy.

Twenty of the colleges and universities with endowments per student exceeding about \$250,000 and the lowest acceptance rates in the nation enroll a total of about 20,000 first-year students. As their endowments recover the value they lost in the financial crisis, they are likely to lavish yet more luxurious facilities and curricular options on their privileged students. What if instead they maintained spending per student but increased the size of their undergraduate student bodies? They would still maintain their positions as the most-selective and the best-endowed colleges and universities in the country.

Right now, the top colleges expand production only reluctantly. They don't tend to increase the size of their entering classes as the number of students enrolling in college grows and the number of applicants qualified to enroll in the best of the best increases. But the distribution at the top is extremely skewed, so there's lots of room before the next tier of schools catch up. Admitting an extra 2,000 or 5,000 or even 10,000 students into this small circle wouldn't eliminate the high school frenzy. But it would diminish it. And it would share the wealth of the extraordinary opportunities offered to a dwindling fraction of college students in the United States.

Institutions wouldn't do this overnight, certainly, but of late both Amherst and Princeton have begun to increase their enrollments modestly, citing aims related to those that motivate us. And certainly the experience of the formerly men's colleges in the early 70s, when they expanded enrollment to make room for half of the human race, has been largely positive.

It is reasonable to ask why we can't just consider a larger number of institutions "elite." Why can't students be happy going to number 40 instead of number 20? In fact, students who wind up at number 40 typically end up satisfied with the place where they enrolled – often, we suspect, at least as happy (and well educated) as if they had climbed further up the ladder. But in our prestige- and position-driven world, few students are as happy with the thick envelope from number 40 as from number 20. It will be no less exciting to be accepted at Harvard if they accept 10 percent of their applicants instead of 8 percent. The top 10 institutions could expand their enrollment by 20 percent without threatening their cachet, whereas the notion of the "top twelve" would be a harder sell.

Conclusion

Higher education is often viewed as a powerful instrument for promoting constructive social change. It is that, in some respects, although it could and should be more so. But higher education is also a mirror of the society it serves, and this aspect is prominent in the workings of both the Big Sort and the Little Sort. The broad sorting of students at the end of high school into more and less promising options for further education is heavily and perhaps even dominantly shaped by the deep patterns of inequality that structure opportunity in our society. And the intense scramble of the Little Sort both mirrors and reinforces the values of a society where the hippest car and the fanciest address are seen as marks of worth.

Reversing the trend toward ever-greater material inequality in our society would ameliorate the negatives of both the big and Little Sort. Low parental income is a powerful predictor of college attainment in this country, and the growing disparity between top and bottom incomes tends to create still greater inequality in the next generation.

The Little Sort is fueled in part by the perception that the path to the most prestigious jobs and financial wealth runs through the top colleges and universities. It is also fueled in significant measure by wealthy and ambitious parents whose investment in college credentials begins with the right preschool and proceeds through the very best private-college counselors and beyond.

It is idle to suggest that higher education, on its own, has the power to overcome the negative consequences of inequality and the quest for positional advantage that help to shape it. But higher education is not helpless. Past efforts to extend educational opportunities to previously excluded groups, including blacks and women, show some of the potential here. Determined efforts by higher education leaders both to improve the pre-college preparation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and to enroll more of them who are qualified can make a difference. At the same time, to whatever extent college officials and faculty can influence students' choice of careers, they should help them gain some perspective on prestige and money as goals and encourage them to focus more on things of intrinsic and social value.

Although prestigious colleges and their leaders are in important ways trapped by the positional competition they feed, they are not without options. Any movement toward cooperation will require those at the top – the big winners in the current scramble—to put some of their advantage at risk.

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Idea Harvest:

Free Response from Conference Participants

“There’s enough concern to bring us all together today – the topic has struck a nerve among our group.”

Compelling Argument: Nothing short of America’s future in dealing with changing demographics, work force needs, etc. We hold the future direction of how our society looks – critical to change practices.

If we don’t believe we need to make a change, then we really don’t have faith in the ability of our institutions to educate less privileged students.

Most compelling reason to change – we are shortchanging ourselves and our future generations by a broken system of testing, sorting, learning outcomes, and perpetuating economic and social disparity. We need to look to future needs of society and make changes now.

Arguing for ever-increasing resources to fight an elitist higher education arms race is NOT SUSTAINABLE nor in service to pressing issues facing our county or society.

Selective institutions need to contribute to addressing these pressing issues or be displaced from their privileged positions of influence, as they’ll be seen as being increasingly irrelevant.

Issue: too many of our nation’s most talented students from low income minority & 1st generation backgrounds are not going to or graduating from our colleges & universities and this impacts our collective/societal well being & the quality of life of the individual.

Solution: Develop the will to act.

Need to re-emphasize our commitment to shaping/directing students to appreciate their talents as gifts that should impact the social good. This can be done through our actions in who we admit, what we say, and what we do with them while they are on our campuses. Placing emphasis on these qualities over testing and grades will have important secondary & tertiary affects.

There is little incentive, now for selective institutions to take risks on non-traditional students. The current system does not focus on nurturing learning so much as winning the competition.

The increased temperature around college admission has contributed to the compromise of value in true learning and interpersonal relationships during adolescence with negative long-term implications for the public good.

Since K-12 and higher ed have grown up largely independent of each other in the US, there is a disconnect between the University faculties – and what they would like to see in terms of student preparation – and K-12 faculties. This disconnect tends to reinforce the status quo in K-12 and to discourage innovation and appropriate necessary risk taking ... to progress. In an era in which we know more about how student actually learn and suspect that they may need different preparation for the future, there needs to be a better bridge between the two faculties to encourage K-12 ... in the right direction. College admissions offices are in fact the only real bridge and they need to take on the challenge of fostering communication/collaboration.

Stop “shotgun recruitment. “ If we have “enough” applications, what is the point of attending upwards of 100 or more college fairs and doing even more school visits? If the reason for this is access then continue these in targeted fashion, but we need to be much more strategic about how we’re allocating our limited resources so that we’re building our prospective pool in meaningful ways and not just for the sake of having a bigger pool.

We have more to gain by cooperating to serve our common public interest than we do by competing according to precepts defined by entities eternal to education. Colleges are institutions held in public trust and their admission activities must exemplify the best that education has to offer.

Considerations to address:

- Go SAT optional.
- Greater user of holistic review, student behavior that show drive, ability, & potential to success in college. It may not be reflected in grades or test scores.
- Sponsor academic academies for k-12, to prepare under represented students to be college ready.
- University needs to have programs, curriculum, & faculty that would attract under represented students.
- Income targeted recruitment for Latino students.

Collective action: greater uniformity of, better definition to, and perhaps more limited use of “early” admission programs.

Current sense of not providing opportunities for those at the lower end of the socio-economic system. Students and institutions may be mismatched which is demonstrated by graduation rates.

As a college counselor, the most compelling case is the negative impact on our young people – their educational choices and opportunities and their emotional well being at a critical time in their development. Education is supposed to be about intellectual and personal enlightenment. The college search should be about self-reflection. The current process often goes against both of these.

I heard today that there are students who are disenfranchised (academically, economically, and ethnically) and this is the reason we need to make a change to honor intrinsic, extrinsic, and social values in how we admit students today for the future. I did not hear that institutions would be willing to bifurcate their goals, missions, from the purpose we see on websites

Test optional; end early decisions; expand size of first year class; spend more time working with transfer students after they arrive on campus.

Help trustees to better understand the social significance of our mission and help break them of their pre-occupation with the rankings.

We began this conference talking about it being a purposeful meeting. We should apply the same standard to students and educate them about what makes for a purposeful college search. This may begin with de-emphasizing or perhaps discontinuing the use of the word “BEST” in college admissions.

Next Steps:

- Develop outcome-focused profile on performance of students of X qualifications.
- Develop a set of recommended resources on which students/parents could rely for guidance.
- Release data on teaching and learning.
- Teaching load for faculty
- Advising load for f/t faculty
- List of faculty on sabbatical and what they are doing

The president/board and faculty would have to embrace the “better good” goal of taking more “diamonds in the rough” and fewer affluent suburbanites. Eliminate merit-based aid (It won’t happen due to Div. I athletics commitments). Become test-optional, if institution specific research verifies that they are not predictive.

Eliminate all early application programs; adopt common applications calendars and deadlines; eliminate the practice of fall applications via FastApp on other similar quick application methods.

What could you do institutionally or collaboratively to affect change? Have a conversation with president and trustees to discuss a realistic goal of “what is enough” in terms of the number of applicants instead of always looking to grow the pool for the sake of growing the pool. AND explain why to the public.

Refrain from promoting rankings.

What considerations?

- Help trustees/pres/faculty appreciate that application counts are not an important metric.
- Find meaningful ways to help faculty deal with the real challenge of differently prepared students in the classroom.
- Help identify other predictors of success (e.g. POSSE selection process)

Practical actions:

- Provide more specific information on our selection process, how do we factor different elements in decision making.
- Better highlight the types of students for whom we would not be a good match, stop selling ourselves as everything to everyone.
- Create some type of online students for prospective students to figure out their admissibility to a specific institution (a net price calculator for admission).
- Deep and sustained engagement with neighborhoods, schools, communities – or their terms – to improve pipelines of students to PSE in general, if not to one’s own institution.
- Change refusal letters to be kinder and gentler.
- Be explicit about entrance criteria to reduce number of “no chance” applications

We don’t pay enough attention to our institutional mission in carrying our admission process. A compelling case for change is that our admission process should reflect our mission (the values described in it).

An additional compelling case for change – if we don't act as a profession, outside forces (Congress, Media, etc) will change it for us. This is particularly true in “truth advertising” around outcomes, admission selectivity stats, and cost & financial aid.

Colleges are marketing themselves as being right for everyone instead of being honest about strengths, weaknesses, and whether the fit the student needs is there. Students are sacrificing true fit for prestige. Proper information at the beginning (coupled with support once there) should help reduce attrition.

Students and families are really unaware of what selective institutions represent and how to apply under them. Counselors and schools are under-resourced so families rely on the media to set their own agenda. They are also unaware of the other great institutions in this country. As much as we try to break these myths and create a space for action it is pushed down b/c of what/how success is measured in this country.

The need for change is driven by our country's need to address the Obama 2020/College Board 2025/Lumina 2025 goals. We as a nation must provide a pathway for many more of our underrepresented students. We are getting an enormous amount of assistance from access/success organizations like KIPP, AVID, and Cristo Rey to name a few. They are mentoring students and helping make them college ready. We need to be more aware of these organizations and work with them by encouraging their work, accepting their students, and tracking them.

We rarely consider the public good. The juncture between institutional self interest & public good is held by the forces (literal & figurative) of institutional interest. This hurts students. We need data, evidence, and even anecdotes that students are being harmed. Trustees, faculty, and presidents must all be persuaded that this matters and is real, and that we can do something about this.

The case for change is that a small percentage of institutions drive the admission frenzy, and prevent equality for all citizens across the higher ed spectrum. Many times this is a result of institutional leadership. The case is that if we are to meet the goals having more students with college degrees by 2025, we need to make college more accessible for all students. This begins with Higher Ed partnering with K-12 and forcing administration to drive admissions and financial aid practices.

Critical and compelling is that growing social and economic inequality degrades human capital pools and retards our country's competitiveness. Higher education's leaders should take the moral high ground in building legitimacy for providing fairness and opportunity for our citizenry.

Why are we so focused on how students look when they come into our institution, rather than how they look when they exit our institutions?

Too much pressure on high stakes testing; stop reporting any test scores; take it off the CDS; don't list on websites; don't report to USNWR, et al

Build a statewide admissions policy with proper assurance to weigh in different educational advances. Rethink the prospective student search process, mostly encourage college preparation – refund application fees to students we deny but actively pursue.

The current system does not seem to be serving either the individual (student applying to college or the collective (our nation) well, given the state and the needs of our society now and in the future. How do we stop the growing gap between the rich and the poor (referring to individuals and institutions)

The current system is creating an environment detrimental, or at cross-purposes with, the often-articulated messages and intentions of college and universities regarding equity, actual expression of educational purpose; faculty rewards systems and contribute to enrollment attitudes and behaviors negatively affecting the social compact.

The return to college/university articulation of educational intentions and direct connection of faculty role to institutional missions.

Interest of trustees, faculty in addressing the big questions...where are they? We have created a sort and select process perceived as generic and homogenous, though colleges and universities should (and often fail) to articulate what they do and to operate an admission system which reflects institutional purpose.

The case for change is:

- In the public interest to education more students for socially useful things.
- Demographic changes/shifts will no longer support the irrational arms race that has come to define the admissions process.
- Our missions are compromised by measuring inputs rather than outputs – not focused on what we do.
- If higher ed can't lead morally (social good) who will? We still enjoy the respect of the public (although it's declining).

We are educators, we should persuade our president to reach out to local schools and address the “pipeline” issue that is a much bigger issue than selective admission. Presidents need to allow/encourage admission deans to take more “diamonds in the rough” and few affluent suburbanites.

Strongest case is that what we currently do tends to perpetuate & exacerbate the bifurcation of our society into haves & have-nots, thereby interfering with the maximizing of our society's human potential. Also, we didn't spend enough time talking about the effects of the stress on our 17 year olds. This is also one of the most compelling reasons for change.

The issue - changing the face of the nation's youth combined with access already being limited. Students/families being essentially barred from upward mobility by our various policies and practices. It is time for more collaboration and less competition. We must remember what is good for the greater good, is not always good for the individual institutions.

The greater public good is not well-served by a process that consistently reinforces the under matching tendencies of the less privileged. But, what is the scope of under matching and how can we effectively educate public policy makers who control resources. Bad data in; bad data out.

There's enough concern to bring us all together today – the topic has struck a nerve among our group. The players all represent one common denominator, students. Something has shifted in our culture to make overly anxious parents/students act crazy – the competition to get into the best has increased –unprecedented apps, etc. We haven't addressed the students concerns – what are our responsibilities as institutions to keep this process sane.

The current state of a country: elitisms tends to be self absorption; only they are working; even this conference assumes everyone is from an elite college. Elite colleges do not reflect who or what America is but rather message and protect white privilege; Their irrelevant reaching will be their downfall; All the speakers were white – a coincidence?

Impact of selective admissions process on high school culture, orientation, and academic program: which schools are favored in this process? What is the demographic of students they serve? How does this process encourage academically competitive & motivated students in low income, first gen, neighborhoods & schools? We need metrics to evaluate (and value) community engagement, service, empathy, and leadership skills alongside academic abilities.

Recommend to president to increase undergraduate student body & get other presidents to sign on. Increase value of service & service-mindedness of an applicant on admission.

The population of college aged youth is steadily increasing & the competition to get into highly competitive schools is also increasing. However, the number of spaces for admission to these schools is not increasing. The belief that the solution of increasing admission to the top schools will have a huge effect. The kinks have not yet been workout out but I believe it is a good start.

Support of underrepresented youth is essential (Tierney). We saw the data & can clearly see the trends of certain students dropping out of college & not attending college. Support in high school is essential. This must happen in the form of mentoring, support, etc.

National welfare: lower income students under-matching affecting college completion even in face of demographic projections.

Something we have not discussed is the severely limited capacity for our officer to actually review all of their applications. Associated with that is the “generic-ness” of our admission criteria: “well-rounded,” “smart/intelligent,” “holistic,” these things mean very little and provide no guidance to the applicants, which has only fueled the frenzy and inflation.

Assuming that there is little space for which “we” can fundamentally change individual institutional imperatives, we must find a common voice to advance the case for change no matter how defined. The supposed strength of the American educational system is its diversity of institutional types. This characteristic effectively inhibits our ability to make change.

Under matching the systematic sorting of low-income and first generation, students to colleges that are less selective then they are qualified for. This results in under-development of these students talent due to lower graduation rates, lower earning potential, and access to leadership positions in society. Importance of educating students about educational, career, and financial implications of college choices – long term.

- Increase tutoring programs
- Use faculty to move issues

Participating Institutions

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The College Board is a mission-driven not-for-profit organization that connects students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the College Board was created to expand access to higher education. Today, the membership association is made up of more than 5,900 of the world's leading educational institutions and is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education. Each year, the College Board helps more than seven million students prepare for a successful transition to college through programs and services in college readiness and college success—including the SAT® and the Advanced Placement Program®. The organization also serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators and schools.



The mission of Lumina Foundation for Education is to expand access to postsecondary education in the United States. The Foundation seeks to identify and promote practices leading to improvement in the rates of entry and success in education beyond high school, particularly for students of low income or other underrepresented backgrounds. It likewise seeks improvement in opportunities for adult learners. The Foundation carries out the mission through communicating ideas through reports, conferences and other means and making grants to educational institutions and other nonprofits for innovative programs. It also contributes limited resources to support selected community and other charitable organizations.



The Spencer Foundation was established in 1962 by Lyle M. Spencer. The Foundation received its major endowment upon Spencer's death in 1968 and began formal grant making in 1971. Since that time, the Foundation has made grants totaling approximately \$250 million. The Foundation is intended, by Spencer's direction, to investigate ways in which education, broadly conceived, can be improved around the world. From the first, the Foundation has been dedicated to the belief that research is necessary to the improvement in education. The Foundation is thus committed to supporting high-quality investigation of education through its research programs and to strengthening and renewing the educational research community through its fellowship and training programs and related activities.



The mission of the USC Rossier School of Education is to strengthen urban education locally, nationally, and globally. Educators in urban areas face a unique set of challenges, including poverty, density, mobility and immigration, strained social conditions around housing, healthcare and crime, and cultural and linguistic diversity. Urban education takes place within many contexts including pre-kindergarten through high school, in human services, higher education, and workplace settings.

The Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice (CERPP) at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles analyzes enrollment issues through the critical perspectives of social science researchers, policymakers, and college and university practitioners. The creation of the center is rooted in the belief that college admission, student financial aid, and degree completion processes must become better informed, more expertly practiced, and more equitable. Moreover, the impacts of these processes must be better understood. To these ends, CERPP brings together individuals and groups to examine college enrollment issues and practices and better meet the collective needs of students, institutions, and society.



**USC Center for Enrollment Research,
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