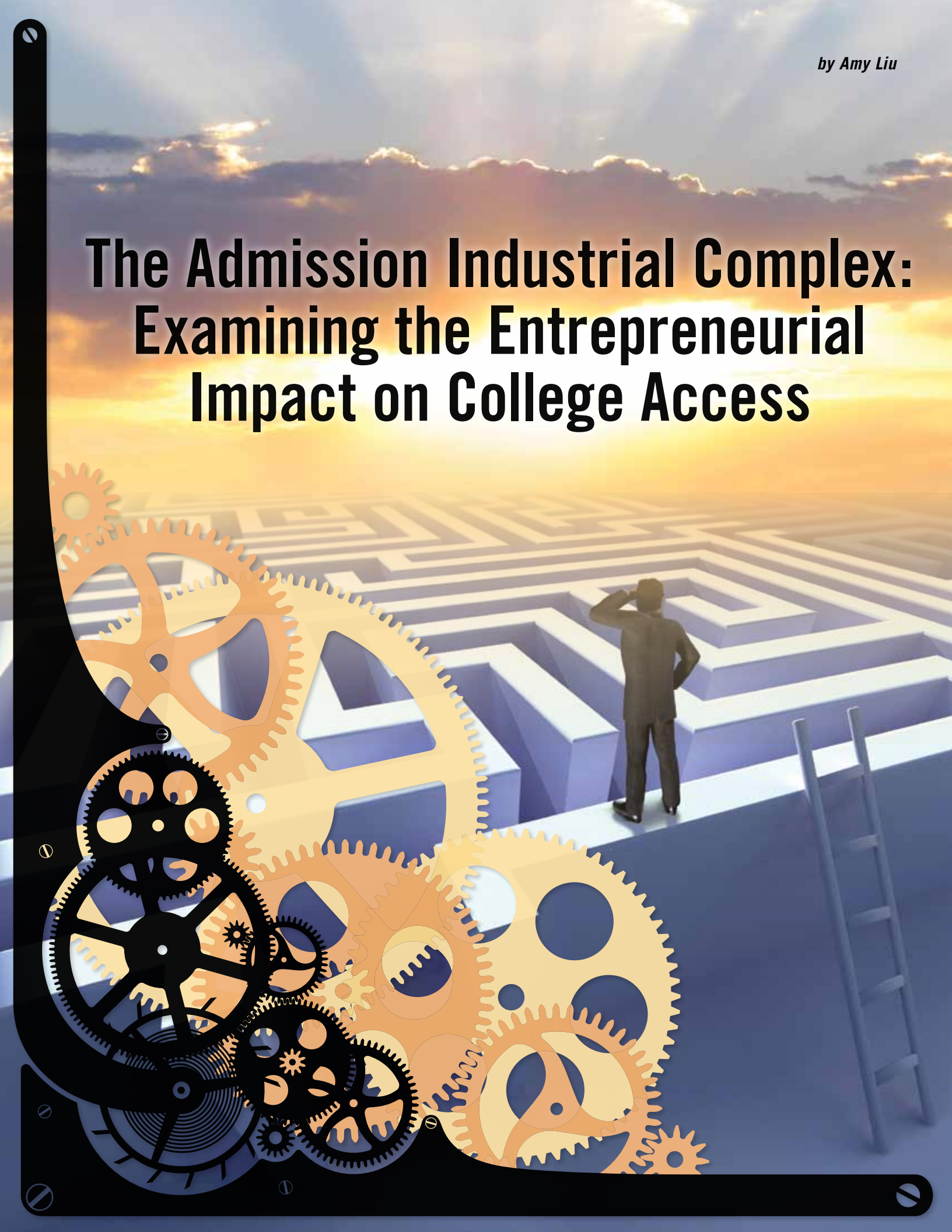


*by Amy Liu*

# The Admission Industrial Complex: Examining the Entrepreneurial Impact on College Access



In a post-industrial society, higher education might be viewed as a “defensive necessity” (Bell 1973, p. 414). From the perspective of economic mobility, having a college degree can greatly improve the chances of moving up the income ladder (Baum and Ma 2007, Haskins 2008). Additionally, college quality can have a significant positive effect on earnings and the pursuit of graduate education (Eide, Brewer and Ehrenberg 1998, Monks 2000; Thomas and Zhang 2005, Wolniak, et al. 2008, Zhang 2005a, 2005b). As enrollment rates increase (NCES 2008), the message that one needs to pursue higher education in order to succeed in our society seems to ring louder and clearer. National news outlets ostensibly feed into this conventional wisdom with reports that admission to the nation’s top-ranking colleges and universities has grown increasingly competitive (Arenson 2008, Tyre 2008). In turn, some students have sought to leverage their own opportunities by turning to an expanding entrepreneurial admission sector. Indeed, a veritable “admission industrial complex” has sprung forth to meet the demands of students seeking to gain an edge over their peers (Marcus 2006, Wang 2007).

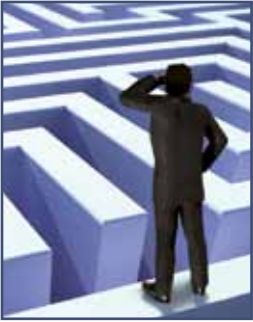
The entrepreneurial admission sector is comprised of commercial enterprises aimed at helping students increase their odds of admission, as well as providing general college information to the masses. As for-profit entities, a goal of companies in this sector is to maximize revenue and profit. Existing research identifies four main activities as making up the entrepreneurial realm: 1) standardized test preparation (test prep) and tutoring, 2) private college counseling, 3) mass media informational resources, and 4) institutional enrollment marketing and management (McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt 2000). The purpose of this article is to build on previous scholarship by highlighting some of the arguments for why this sector creates the potential to perpetuate the already unequal playing field of higher education participation. It then offers considerations for how three additional areas—student financial services, packaged and customized college tours, and essay coaching—contribute to the inequity. It also provides an account of the big business revenue of these myriad activities. In doing so, it adds to the discussion of how corporations capitalize on the perception of “defensive necessity,” thereby escalating the commercial incursion on college access.

#### **The Entrepreneurial Impact on the Field of College Access**

Previous research on college choice has encompassed three basic approaches—social psychological studies, economic studies

and sociological status attainment studies (McDonough 1997). By integrating the seemingly disparate approaches within cultural and organizational frameworks, college access researchers have transformed the domain into a more robust area of inquiry. McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt (2000) propose an organizational field approach to the study of college access that enables greater understanding of how numerous factors—individuals, high schools, colleges and universities, policy, and the entrepreneurial sector—work in concert to structure higher education participation. Variables such as social class, race and ethnicity, gender, high school context, parental and family involvement, culture, and financial aid intersect to shape students’ decisions to pursue higher education, their understanding of the admission process, and the college choices they make (Fann 2002, Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith 1989, Perna, et al. 2008, Smith and Fleming 2006, Swail, Cabrera and Lee 2004, Teranishi, et al. 2004, Tierney and Auerbach 2005, Villalpando and Solorzano 2005).

From a field perspective, the entrepreneurial admission sector constitutes a field in and of itself that is ripe for analysis. McDonough, et al. (2000) argue that the driving force behind the growth of commoditized college knowledge is “the reciprocal influence of individuals and institutions, particularly through the influence of socioeconomic status” (p. 393). The field of



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entrepreneurial admission involves a complex interplay between large corporations, the media, individual actors, and social class. Given the rising commercialization of higher education (Bok 2003, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), a closer examination of this sector is warranted, especially concerning its potential to exacerbate inequity in higher education. Three activities in particular, test prep, private college counseling, and rankings, have been at the forefront of scrutiny.

#### *Test Prep and Tutoring*

Although the merits of standardized tests, their use in the admission process and their predictive power for postsecondary success are certainly debatable (Zwick 2004), standardized exams themselves are big business and therefore inextricably tied to the entrepreneurial admission sector. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), parent to the SAT and other exams, is a corporate educational player with yearly financials that include net sales of \$850 million (Hoover's 2009a).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the test prep industry is perhaps the most recognized driving force of entrepreneurial admission. Kaplan, Princeton Review and Sylvan Learning are three national examples of test coaching and tutoring corporations. According to Kaplan's (2009) Web site, courses for SAT prep in the Los Angeles area range from \$399 for online self-study to \$3,899 for private tutoring. However, test prep is only one component of these for-profit educational corporations' products and services. For example, only \$108 million of Princeton Review's \$139 million total revenue in 2008 came from test prep services; supplemental education services generated the remaining \$30 million (Hoover's 2009c). In 2008, of Kaplan's \$2 billion revenue, only \$588 million came from sales in its test prep unit. The remaining revenue derived from its higher education (\$1,276 million), professional (\$467 million) and corporate divisions (\$1.4 million) (Hoover's 2009b). Notably, Kaplan is now the supporter of its parent, the Washington Post Company. Compared to Kaplan's 52 percent share

of the company's \$4.7 billion total revenue in 2008, advertising made up 25 percent and circulation and subscribers a mere 20 percent of the Washington Post Company's overall revenue (Hoover's 2009d). Alongside the national corporate providers are a slew of independent, locally-owned test prep and tutoring companies. The quantity and quality of these are unknown as there are no test prep associations that organize the industry.

Persistent score disparities between racial/ethnic and income groups, as well as inequalities in access to and familiarity with standardized exams have led to concerns about the role of tests as barriers to higher education participation (Atkinson 2001, Carnevale and Rose 2003, NACAC 2008a, Steele and Aronson 1998, Walpole, et al. 2005, Zwick 2007). The issue is particularly salient given that 89 percent of colleges place considerable or moderate importance on standardized tests as a factor in admission decisions (Clinedinst and Hawkins 2008). The Commission of a 2008 National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) report argues that the consequent test prep industry "would not, of course, exist without two primary inputs: (1) a majority of colleges and universities require standardized admission tests for admission, and (2) families sustain the demand for such services with disposable income and a desire to give their students 'a leg up' in the admission process" (p. 24).

The effects of test prep in college admission can be minor, yet significant. In a recently released NACAC discussion paper, Briggs (2009) notes that "coaching has a positive effect on SAT performance, but the magnitude of the effect is small" (p. 12). Contrary to commercial claims that scores can vastly improve in the range of hundreds of points, researchers have found that any gains from test prep activities are closer to an average of 30 points, a number which is also the standard error of measurement for the SAT (Briggs 2009). The practical significance, however,

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, ETS' legal status is listed as private, not-for-profit ([www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)).

of test prep effects can be much greater. In a NACAC survey that asked about the impact of test score increases in admission decisions, Briggs finds that in some instances more than a third of admission directors agreed that an increase of 10 points on the math section of the SAT or a 10-point gain on the critical reading portion would “significantly improve a student’s likelihood of admission” (p. 19). Furthermore, on the lower spectrum of SAT scores and at less selective institutions, a small increase does the most to improve a student’s chances of admission. Similarly, at higher scores on the scale and at more selective schools, a minor increase appears to have an equal or even larger impact of improving acceptance to an institution. As Briggs states, “A 10 or 20 point coaching effect is clearly very practically significant if it crosses a cut-off threshold” (p. 21).

A college access consequence is that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who are not able to afford test preparation and multiple test administrations, are at greater risk of being further disadvantaged in the admission process. Studies show that socioeconomic status (SES) contributes to the likelihood that students will use test prep services and take the exam more than once. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), Buchmann, Roscigno and Condrón (2006) find that family SES is a positive and significant factor in predicting test prep usage, most notably for private class and tutoring activities. Vigdor and Clotfelter (2003) find that students who retake admission exams are from more affluent families, have more highly educated parents and have

test prep can still be important, including for racially underrepresented students in higher education. Using NELS data, Perna (2000) finds that African-American students’ use of more than one test prep tool is a predictive variable in the probability of enrolling at a four-year college or university. Such students are 11 percent ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to enroll. White students who used one test prep tool or more than one test prep tool are five percent ( $p < .01$ ) and 11 percent ( $p < .001$ ) more likely to enroll, respectively. There was no significant change in probability for Latino students (p. 134). Walpole et al. (2005) find that many African-American and Latino students in their study are generally rather wary of standardized tests and question their fairness. Despite the doubt, some do avail themselves of low-cost and free exam prep offered by schools and outreach programs (nine percent) and find ways to take the SAT more than once (40 percent) in an effort to raise their scores (p. 336). The quality of the free services, however, is unknown and almost none of the students had access to private and commercial test prep services.

Likening test prep activities to the use of performance-enhancing steroids in sports, Gayles (2009) draws a compelling analogy between education and athletics and questions what is considered fair play. He argues that test prep is anathema to fair play in college admission and offers benefits only to those who can afford it. However, he also acknowledges that disposing of such services will not eliminate systems of advantage. From an

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higher self-reported abilities and class rank. Their study, however, is not based upon a national dataset, but rather from analysis of undergraduate applicant data from three selective research universities in the South. Nevertheless, their findings show that students who took the SAT three times demonstrated average score increases of 29 and 28 points for the verbal and math sections, respectively.

Although coaching effects are small and nowhere near what commercial companies advertise (Briggs 2009), the benefits of

entrepreneurial admission perspective, the test prep industry is big business and unlikely to wane.

#### *Private College Counseling*

In addition to efforts to raise test scores, the competitive pressures of getting into selective colleges and universities have led some students to seek expert assistance from private college counselors. These private admission consultants offer personalized attention and specialized knowledge to help students strategically navigate the complex





...by engaging in the purchase of professional college knowledge, they can market themselves as competitive products to higher education institutions, thereby transforming themselves into college applicant commodities.

and high-stakes terrain of college admission. Students are turning to these independent counselors either because their high schools are not providing adequate college counseling or because they want to pursue every available advantage (McDonough, Korn and Yamasaki 1997, McDonough 2005b). Some examples of full-service counseling providers include IvyWise and College Coach. These organizations pride themselves on offering prospective students a comprehensive, total package approach, often bolstered by their counselors' own first-hand, insider admission experience at colleges and universities nationwide. According to the latest financial information obtained, IvyWise and College Coach recorded net sales of \$440,000 (Dun and Bradstreet 2009) and \$2.5–\$5.0 million (US Business Directory 2008), respectively.

A recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* questioned the ethics of private admission counseling (Jaschik 2008). According to the online news report, it is not altogether out of the ordinary for full-time high school college counselors or higher education admission personnel to offer private consulting services despite their day jobs. Such practices raise conflict of interest flags and bring to light questions about whose best interests are these employees representing—students and institutions or their own financial benefit? Although multiple relationships are not forbidden, the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) offer statements of principles of good practice that members are required to adhere to in their roles (IECA 2006, NACAC 2008b). For example, NACAC stipulates that its members will “make protecting the best interests of all students a primary concern in the admission process” and “will be ethical and respectful in their counseling, recruiting and enrollment practices” (2008b, p. 2). IECA has a more explicit provision concerning “multiple relationships and potential conflicts of interest,” which its members “are expected to avoid” (2006, p. 1). However, not all private admission counselors are members of these associations and therefore they are not all bound by the same professional codes of conduct.

McDonough (1997, 2005a, 2005b) states that counselors play an important and influential role, both positively and negatively, in the field of college access. She also notes that there are various structural and practical challenges in the domain of college counseling that counselors, teachers, students, parents, and schools face. In an era of perceived high-stakes admission, some students and parents have actively sought the help of private college counselors (McDonough, 2005b). These individuals and families may do so because they are dissatisfied with school-based college counseling or because they desire a “leg up” compared to their peers. Students who seek private college counseling are found more likely to exhibit the following traits: 1) active advice seekers, 2) from privileged families, 3) apply to more colleges, 4) attend private colleges far from home, and 5) are less influenced by financial concerns (McDonough, Korn and Yamasaki 1997).

McDonough, Korn and Yamasaki's (1997) finding that socioeconomic status is a prevailing indicator for the use of a private college counselor has serious implications for college access. The authors point out that less advantaged students, particularly first-generation college students, are further disadvantaged because those who already have the college-going resources, information and cultural capital end up accumulating more of these things. The findings in this study also appear to further attest to the phenomenon of students socially constructed as college applicants, which has fueled the growth of the entrepreneurial admission sector (McDonough 1994). That is, students are no longer merely seniors looking to transition to the next stage of their education. Rather, by engaging in the purchase of professional college knowledge, they can market themselves as competitive products to higher education institutions, thereby transforming themselves into college applicant commodities. Furthermore, colleges and universities' power-plays for high-ability students seem to enable the managed packaging of applicants (Geiger 2002). Amidst these developments, an unfortunate consequence is that students who do not have the means to game the system fall further behind.

### *Mass Media Informational Resources*

An area of the entrepreneurial admission sector that is available to more than the privileged few is mass media informational resources. The resources may include college guidebooks, such as Peterson's *Four Year Colleges* and Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges*. These companies also offer easily searchable CD-ROM and online versions of their college manuals. Peterson's and Barron's are two long-standing, comprehensive handbooks, but the field is littered with hundreds of college guides and advice books. A small sample of these include IvyWise founder Katherine Cohen's *The Truth About Getting In* and *Rock Hard Apps*, as well as College Coach founder Michael London's and Stephen Kramer's *The New Rules of College Admissions*. Businesses that provide test prep services, such as Princeton Review and Kaplan, also offer their own versions of college guides and pursue aggressive marketing tactics by embedding their test prep services with an abundance of advertising for college promotional materials, including offers for financial aid (Buckleitner 2006).

Aside from the plethora of publications, mass media informational resources are perhaps best embodied by national institutional rankings. The most prominent of these is *U.S. News & World Report's* (USNWR) annual "America's Best Colleges" issue, which offers a multitude of categorical rankings. On an international scale, rankings are also available from the British *Times Higher Education* world university rankings and China's academic ranking of world universities, published by Shanghai Jiao Tong

*...rankings have a tendency to help increasingly stratify the American higher education system ...rankings drive schools into a high stakes, "academic excellence" social climbing game that does not accurately reflect true academic quality, creates a needlessly competitive environment, and is counterproductive to educational priority.*

University. Rankings have certainly engendered their fair share of controversy, academic disdain, debates on admission outcomes, and institutional envy (Ehrenberg 2002, Meredith 2004). They have also been mainstreamed into our consumer culture (Chang and Osborn, 2005). For example, Chang and Osborn (2005) examine the USNWR rankings from the perspective of a "spectacle," arguing that the abstracted images of rankings "have come to acquire a powerful role in determining the material conditions of colleges and universities" (p. 342). While it can be argued that

these rankings provide the public with relevant college information, according to Mel Elfin, former executive editor of USNWR's "America's Best Colleges," the goal in creating the guide was to "sell magazines" (personal communication, Spring 2002).

Perhaps owing to the decentralized and hierarchical nature of our higher education system, colleges and universities have a propensity to chase after their more prestigious peers in the name of reputational excellence (Astin 1985). Subsequently, mass media informational resources attempt to communicate an institution's reputation to the public, usually in the form of college rankings in a variety of niches (e.g., academics, campus social life, selectivity, financial value, etc.). Research studying the impact of college rankings has generally focused on the annual USNWR rankings (Clarke 2007, Ehrenberg 2002, McDonough, et al., 1998, Meredith 2004). In a review of the impact of higher education rankings on student access, choice and opportunity in the US, Clarke (2007) notes that rankings have a tendency to help increasingly stratify the American higher education system. Ehrenberg (2002) concurs that rankings drive schools into a high stakes, "academic excellence" social climbing game that does not accurately reflect true academic quality, creates a needlessly competitive environment and is counterproductive to educational priority.

In terms of student consequences, Clarke (2007) concludes that rankings "create unequal opportunities for different groups of students" (p. 66). She notes that rankings have a tendency

to advantage high-income, high-achieving students most, as well as disadvantage minority and low-income students most. McDonough, et al. (1998) argue that the façade of rankings as a "democratization of college knowledge" crumbles under the weight of privatization and commoditization. In the study's withering discussion section, the authors lambaste the rankings industrial complex and contend, "In fact, given that rankings users are high-SES, high-ability students, this phenomenon is likely contributing to social reproduction in college access" (p. 523).

Unlike federal loans, however, private loans possess greater flexibility in terms of fees, interest rates and repayment terms; are riskier and therefore generally have higher interest rates; and offer greater services and rewards such as an easier application process and benefits for on-time payments.

### An Expanding Sector

The test prep industry, private college counseling and mass media resources, such as national rankings, have been the most frequently examined areas of the entrepreneurial admission sector. The main critique of these services is that they tend to further privilege students from already advantaged backgrounds and to excessively amplify the competitive atmosphere of college admission. As a field for analysis, there are three additional segments of the entrepreneurial admissions sector—student financial services, college tours and essay coaching—that researchers ought to consider and study more closely in terms of their impact on college access.

### Student Financial Services

The student financial services sector is a multi-billion dollar industry that generally involves savings and loan products. Though financial aid may be a large component of the business, the companies involved in these transactions may also engage in other activities. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), on the one hand there are not-for-profit lenders and state-based student loan secondary market organizations. On the other hand there are the non-traditional lenders, such as Sallie Mae and Nelnet (2008). These two financial giants, known at the corporate parent level as SLM Corporation and Nelnet, Inc., are publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE). In December 2008, SLM and Nelnet reported gross operating profits of \$5.5 billion and \$1.1 billion respectively (Morningstar 2009a, 2009b). Combined, these two conglomerates also own a host of subsidiaries with stakes in virtually every domain of the entrepreneurial admission sector. For example, in addition to managing \$180 billion in education loans, SLM also manages more than \$17.5 billion in 529 savings plans through its Upromise, Inc. subsidiary, and the company offers a range of debt management services and

sophisticated financial tools and products to higher education institutions (SallieMae 2009). Furthermore, Nelnet owns CUNet, an enrollment management service provider, as well as Peterson's, which, in addition to guidebooks, also offers test preparation and student financial services. The breadth of products that SLM Corporation and Nelnet, Inc., as well as Kaplan (a subsidiary of The Washington Post Company) and Sylvan Learning (owned by Educate Services, Inc.) encompass suggests that a significant portion of the entrepreneurial admission sector is driven by a handful of large conglomerates.

The concern about the high price of higher education is a common refrain that seems to echo among students, families, the media, policymakers, and politicians (Johnstone 2001). As the perception of higher education shifted from that of a public good to a private good in the late 20th Century (Heller and Rogers 2006), so too did the responsibility of paying for it transfer from institutions to individuals (Hossler 2006). Over the last couple of decades, students and families have increasingly turned to loans as a means of funding their higher education (Long and Riley 2007). According to the College Board's *Trends in Student Aid* reports, although the bulk of loans are federally awarded (\$72.9 billion in 2007–08), private sector loans were a \$22.3 billion market in 2007–08, an increase of 792 percent over the private loan volume in 1997–1998 (\$2.5 billion). By contrast, federal loan volume increased a mere 85 percent over that same decade from \$39.3 billion (Baum and Payea 2008, p. 6, Baum, Payea and Steele 2009, p. 6). Evidently, the private loan sector is a rapid growth market.<sup>2</sup>

Lenders such as Nelnet and Sallie Mae, or traditional banks such as Bank of America or Citibank, may participate in both the federal loan programs and the private loan market. As a result, private loans share some similarities with federal loans, such as the stipulation that the loan amount cannot exceed

<sup>2</sup> Due to the economic recession and difficulties in the credit market, the 2009 *Trends in Student Aid* report estimates that private loan volume may be down as much as 50 percent in 2008–2009 compared to the previous year.



the cost of attendance. Unlike federal loans, however, private loans possess greater flexibility in terms of fees, interest rates and repayment terms; are riskier and therefore generally have higher interest rates; and offer greater services and rewards such as an easier application process and benefits for on-time payments (Wegmann, Cunningham and Merisotis 2003). Given the seemingly ever escalating costs associated with attending college, the student financial services sector will remain a big entrepreneurial player in college access.

The topic of higher education finance is complex to navigate and studies have shown that concerns about costs and perceptions about financial aid are deterrents to higher education participation for low-income and racially underrepresented students (Freeman 1997, Luna De La Rosa 2006, Perna 2000). McDonough and Calderone (2006) call for more research that incorporates a sociocultural understanding of money, costs, affordability, and financial aid. In addition to the student and family point of view, they state it is imperative that colleges also take into account the sociocultural perspectives of the counselors and financial aid officers who work with the individuals. In this way, institutions would be better equipped to “adequately market college affordability” and therefore, work more productively towards “closing the college access opportunity gap” (p. 1716). Given the enormity of the student financial services sector, future research should also examine how the entrepreneurial behaviors, services and practices of these firms might perpetuate or mitigate the opportunity gap.

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#### *College Tours*

Another example of the entrepreneurial admission sector is packaged and customized college tours. Two companies that offer such services include College Visits, Inc. and CE Tours. Self-proclaimed as the “nation’s leader in educational tourism,”

CE Tours provides one-stop shopping for teachers, counselors, parents, and students to arrange campus visits. In the sample four-day daily itinerary for California, the 17 schools toured or featured as alternatives reflect a range of public and private colleges and universities.<sup>3</sup> For the most part, the undergraduate profiles of these schools fall in the selective or more selective categories of the Carnegie Classification system. Offering about 20 tours per year, the College Visits tours range in price from \$1,335 to \$2,385 depending upon the region and time of year. Most of the schools listed on its 2009 tour schedules also appear to be selective or more selective schools.

Campus tours are rituals that enable institutions to construct an idealized image of the campus and its community (Magolda 2000). Students who participate in a campus tour may be able to gain insight into the norms and values about an institution that cannot be gleaned from its Web site or printed materials. Whether students visit campuses as part of a company’s packaged tour or on their own, they are incurring additional costs as part of the admission process. In their role as socially constructed college applicants (McDonough 1994), students are buying added knowledge about the schools, as well as selling their interest to the admission offices. In a 2005 NACAC survey, 46 percent of colleges reported that a campus visit by a prospective student was considered a “plus factor” in the admission process (Hawkins and Clinedinst 2006). In fact, colleges and universities consider student “demonstrated interest” (e.g., as signaled by

a campus visit) as a factor in the admission decision. According to the NACAC 2008 State of College Admission report, 76 percent of colleges responding to the annual admission trends survey designated some level of importance to a student’s interest in attending the institution. From 2003 to 2007, the percentage

<sup>3</sup> The California schools listed are UC Berkeley, Stanford, San Jose State, Santa Clara University, San Francisco State, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, UCSB, Cal State Channel Island, Pepperdine University, UCLA, Fashion Institute of Technology, Loyola Marymount University, USC, Occidental College, Whittier College, Caltech, and The Claremont Colleges ([www.cetours.com/california.html](http://www.cetours.com/california.html)).





Whereas the entrepreneurial admission sector might have begun as a cottage industry of individuals offering exam tutorials or college application advice to interested students, today it appears to be a massive complex of providers ranging from large business institutions...

of colleges assigning “considerable importance” to demonstrated interest as a factor in admission rose from seven percent to 22 percent (Clinedinst and Hawkins 2008). Students without the means to travel nationally, or even regionally, to participate in campus tours are therefore at a disadvantage as far as demonstrating their level of interest in an effort to make themselves more attractive applicants to institutions.

#### *Essay Coaching*

One final phenomenon of the entrepreneurial sector worth examining is the outsourcing of admission essays. While private college counselors may include essay coaching or editing as part of their full service approach, a newer crop of businesses focus solely on helping students construct the perfect admission essay. Essay coaching services have been around since the 1990s, but the ease of online editing has facilitated the growth of this niche. In 2002, the year that it was sold to Peterson's, EssayEdge, one of the market's leading providers, had \$6 million in revenue (Gose 2007). According to its Web site, EssayEdge offers a range of services priced from \$93.95 for simple proofreading of grammar, spelling and mechanical problems, to \$335.95 and up for two and half weeks of attention that takes the student from a background questionnaire to a finished essay that has been vetted for structure, focus, clarity, and effectiveness. IvyEssays, another professional editing and essay source, sells sample essays online for as low as \$3 for a package of five. Students can shop for essays grouped into a wide range of categories, such as favorite book or character. These include essays written about books ranging from John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Another category of available essays is designated childhood experience, and it offers essays written about an event or experience from childhood. Included in the purchase are the names of the institutions where students who composed these essays were accepted.

Defenders of essay coaching suggest that such services can help “level the playing field.” For example,

Michael Fleischner, an executive at Nelnet, the parent company of Peterson's, argues, “A lot of the people we work with don't have parents who are college professors... They're the everyday student who needs a little extra help, and they can't get it from their guidance counselor” (Gose 2007, p.18). His statement does point out the shortcoming that counseling services are not always readily available to students, which researchers have noted is a constraining factor for higher education participation (McDonough 2005a, 2005b). However, it glosses over the fact that not all students have the financial means to purchase the services his company provides. In addition to concerns regarding plagiarism, the idea that outsourcing admission essays can be viewed as a positive development is questionable. It is especially troubling when bearing in mind that 63.7 percent of colleges and universities rate the essay or writing sample as considerably or moderately important in the admission decision (Clinedinst and Hawkins 2008).

#### **The Admission Industrial Complex**

Whereas the entrepreneurial admission sector might have begun as a cottage industry of individuals offering exam tutorials or college application advice to interested students, today it appears to be a massive complex of providers ranging from large business institutions, some of which participate in government-sponsored programs (e.g., the student financial services sector), to small-business owners and self-employed entrepreneurs. In addition to publicly-traded, billion-dollar educational service corporations, there are also privately-run tours, counseling, and test prep operations that meet the demands of the communities in which they exist. McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt (2000) note that the rapid growth of the entrepreneurial sector represents a clear shift towards the “commodification of college-knowledge” (p. 391). The development of such a sector also challenges our notions of meritocracy within the context of higher education (Liu, 2011). Given that colleges and universities have arguably moved further from a social institution logic towards an industry one

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(Gumport, 2002), and in line with what appears to be an admission shift to a market logic (McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt 2000), it is perhaps not surprising that such an enterprising sector developed. The key concern is what kind of impact the entrepreneurial admission sector has on college access.

The intersection of the entrepreneurial admission sector and the field of college access reveals a coordination that seemingly challenges the ideas of mobility and opportunity. Indeed, the admission industrial complex appears to be most effective in protecting privilege. Researchers examining the factors that facilitate or hinder college access have framed the issues from a social and cultural capital perspective (Freeman 1997, McDonough 1997, Perna 2000, Villalpando and Solorzano 2005). Students for whom a college-going culture is ingrained into their high school lives are readily familiar with the norms and values of the admission process. They also have the support structures needed to facilitate the transition to college. For students who are not as aware of what the process entails, the pursuit of higher education is a more difficult, though still attainable endeavor. The commercialization of college admission knowledge and information suggests that social and cultural capital can be easily bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course, such capital can only be purchased by those who possess the financial means to do so, thereby further stratifying college access by socioeconomic status. The lure of big dollars suggests that individuals and organizations operating in the entrepreneurial realm are unlikely to cease their activities anytime soon. Furthermore, the pervasive existence of this sphere, facilitated by online technology, means that whether personally or professionally, most individuals affiliated with the higher education sector have likely and inevitably contributed in some way to these various companies' bottom line.

The unfortunate consequence of the entrepreneurial admission sector's impact on college access is that it further leads higher education into a privatized and commoditized domain. Additionally, there

is immense potential for reproducing the persistent inequalities in higher education attainment and some of the research examining this sector seems to affirm such circumstances. Due to the services provided and the applicants they tend to benefit, it would appear that the playing field for college access will remain precipitous for students from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. In an era when colleges and universities themselves seem to have embraced entrepreneurialism and commercialism (Clark 1998, Bok 2003, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), it appears doubtful that the enterprising admission sector will wane. Therefore, it may be important for scholars and practitioners committed to higher education equity and access to search for the value added by the activities in this sector. The goal would be to identify the ways in which we can capitalize on the existing structures in order to improve the conditions of college access for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. However, we must also remain critical. At the core, the companies and individuals involved in this for-profit sector are in the business of selling goods and services to students and marketing students to colleges and universities. As we seek greater understanding of the benefits and challenges wrought by entrepreneurial admission, we should do so for the purpose of advancing access to higher education for underserved students without yielding to the private corporate interests of the sector's biggest players. We must remember that higher education ought to remain a public good unencumbered by the influences of a private good, market-oriented consumer mentality.



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