

by Andrew V. Beale

The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same

Response to “The Evolution of College Admission Requirements” on page 20

I remember my article on college admission requirements quite well. It was the first article I had ever written. When the acceptance letter requesting a picture arrived in the mail, I was so excited. I rushed down to the corner drug store where there was a 25 cents photo booth and had my picture made. I mailed the picture that day and eagerly awaited the arrival of the issue of the *Journal* with my article in it. When the issue finally arrived, I proudly took it home for my wife to see. To my chagrin, her only comment was how awful the picture looked. Now, 40 years and more than 150 articles later, I am grateful to the Editorial Committee for the opportunity to look back.

Fortunately, I wrote about the history of college admission requirements, rather than attempting to foretell the future. While examining the past may have been easier than predicting what would lie ahead, I believed then and I believe now that admission counselors benefit from reflecting on their historical roots. An appreciation of how admission practices evolved provides an essential historical context for more properly evaluating contemporary thought and practice (and for better anticipating the future).

While the earlier article did not purport to provide a definitive history of college admission requirements, it did highlight many of the precipitating events and major organizations and personalities that played key roles in influencing the evolution of admission practices as we know them today. Although the article's concluding paragraph noted that many colleges needed to broaden their views of the admission process, I do not believe my crystal ball would have provided a clear picture of what this would mean for college admission in the '70s and beyond.



For example, who would have envisioned the current disenchantment with standardized testing? The College Board launched the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1926 with the intention of infusing more objectivity into the admission process. And it did. During the first half of the 20th Century, standardized tests were valued as relatively inexpensive tools for assessing a student's potential for success in college. As more high school graduates applied for admission, standardized tests allowed colleges to efficiently and economically process thousands of applications. However, as increasing numbers of minority students applied for college, standardized tests were criticized as being discriminatory, especially toward African-American and Hispanic applicants. Accepting that standardized tests did discriminate against minority applicants, many colleges began to employ race as a factor to be weighed in with other criteria when arriving at admission decisions. Using race as an admission criterion caused sparked heated debates. College admission counselors were left having to advise students, especially minority students, without knowing the extent to which race would impact their chances of being admitted to college. Race became a central unknown in the admission advising process.

However, by 2000 public and political support for using race-based affirmative action in college admission was on the decline and admission directors were searching for race-neutral ways to satisfy institutional missions of diversity and equity. More recently, institutions have been challenged to adopt procedures that, rather than employing narrowly defined quantitative criteria, look at prospective students in a more comprehensive manner. Colleges are being urged to develop more holistic ways to assess student potential in an equitable manner. Or, as I wrote 40 years ago, colleges are becoming "... increasingly aware of the need to broaden their view of the admission process in order to insure that the full range of talent that an institution is capable of developing is properly represented in the student body." In retrospect, Bon Jovi's lyrics were right, "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Henry Ford once said, "history is just one damn thing after another" and so it may seem with the history of college admission requirements. With so many names, dates and organizations to keep up with, it is understandable why admission counselors sometimes lose their historical perspective. Plus, the press of day-to-day job demands makes it easy for counselors to neglect to take time away from the present to reflect on the past. Nonetheless, it continues to be my hope that by better understanding their professional history, admission counselors will be able to chart a clearer course for the future.



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