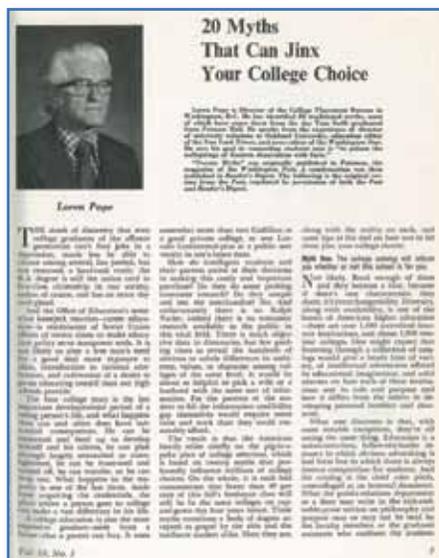


Myths and the College Process, a Retrospective

Response to “20 Myths That Can Jinx Your College Choice” on page 24

The year 1973 was a time of rotary phones, typewriters, carbon paper, three television stations, and bad fashion (think bell-bottom pants, wide ties, mini-skirts and leisure suits). While recognizable to us today, college admission was delivered using different tools, mediums of communication, and operated largely under a philosophy of education instead of today’s business model. In 1973, the domestic climate was surprisingly similar to today in that the economy was bad, unemployment was high, an energy crisis was looming, and there was social and political unrest across the country. At that time, a college education was considered expensive, yet as is true now, education was seen as the doorway to economic opportunity. One perceptive observer of those times was Loren Pope, already an icon in college admission, who would later become the author of *Colleges That Change Lives*. It was in this climate that Pope wrote an insightful article for the *Journal*, “20 Myths That Can Jinx Your College Choice.” In his critique he addressed what he believed were the great untruths or exaggerations of his era. In some of his analysis, he was ahead of his time, in some he was off target, as he could never have foreseen the path college admission would follow.

Pope’s first myth addresses the misperception that the college catalog is the fount of all knowledge regarding an individual college. He decries their “interchangeability.” One of his harshest statements was, “Education is a status-consciousness, follow the leader industry.” While the college catalog has lost its position on the shelves of guidance offices, the Internet has jumped in to fill the void.



And, yes, it is still sometimes hard to tell what distinguishes one college from another with a cursory glance. It is also harder to tell the difference between students with the upsurge of applications brought on by creative recruitment techniques and the explosion of the Common Application. Today there remains a desire to be like everyone else, to find more applications, become more selective and to rank higher.

In myths two and 14, Pope focuses on the urban legends that students should apply early and it is hard to get into college. Both myths remain prevalent today. Reacting to the '70s marketplace, Pope observed a world of declining domestic enrollments. Today, as we enter another period of declining secondary graduates, we flock to sessions at NACAC and College Board that lament the process becoming “earlier and earlier.” Who could have anticipated the international marketing of American colleges to China, India and South Korea? Even with these changes, college remains accessible and available to most students. While students still do

not have to apply early to gain admission, it is hard to dispute the advantages.

Pope takes exception to a prevailing myth of his time (myths three and four) “bigger is better.” He makes a strong argument, saying that while larger schools offer more courses, majors and activities, it is not for everyone. For over a generation, as a profession, we have embraced counseling for fit as the key to success in college. My motto is, “College is a match to be made, not a prize to be won,” to which I add, “If you make a good match, isn’t that the best prize?”

Myths six, seven and eight can be summed up as, “What’s in a name? Actually a lot!” In certain segments of society, Eastern schools are still considered superior and there remains the belief that diplomas from certain schools will help get the first interview. Then, as now, friends and parents gossiped about the quality of a school based on a name. Today many more colleges have joined the national conversation regarding the quality of their education and they span the entire country. For evidence, look no further than the list of Rhodes, Marshall or Fulbright scholars each year, or what schools produced the top CEOs or Nobel Laureates. Many colleges and universities once considered regional have developed national followings.

Pope becomes quite specific in myths 10, 11, 16, 17, and 18, largely confining his observations to what he believed is required, for entry to the Ivy League. I question his perception of qualifying bars—frankly, it was never that simple, and it is even less so now. While it is true college admission has never been completely fair, I would contend

it is now more equitable. I would also argue what is required to gain admission to a highly-selective institution has increased exponentially. In turn, these demands have created more stress disorders in our graduates. Yet, even in this era of expanding application pools, reduced resources and smaller admission staffs, I find that admission officers at all types of institutions work tirelessly at their jobs, remain timely and committed to a quality performance, and to fair, equitable and understandable results.

Myth 12 focuses on college affordability and scholarships. Pope points out that many people believe they cannot afford to pay for college, when in actuality hard work and scholarship opportunities can usually accomplish this goal. However, Pope wrote his article when the Basic Education Opportunity Grants (later called Pell Grants) covered 75–80 percent of college tuitions for needy students. Today the ability to pay has become more difficult, college debt is astronomical and scholarships are not easy to attain. If this trend is not soon reversed,

affordability of a college education itself in America may become a truism rather than a myth.

Pope concludes with myths regarding the SAT, condemning as an exaggeration the myths, “scores can get you in,” and that the test can actually be “coached... and therefore improve your chances.” Time has shown more truth to these myths than any of us really wants to admit. Today it seems the average acceptance scores go up each year and more than once colleges have told me scores have kept certain students from being admitted. Add the explosion of secondary-level grade inflation and the class rank

elimination, and it is easy to see the reasoning behind the enhanced importance of scores. As to the coaching question, a whole industry has evolved around preparing students for college testing.

Pope dedicated his life to empowering students, parents and professionals. He believed college, in America, is the great equalizer. He embraced such themes as, “One size cannot fit all” students and that there is room for both the big and small schools. During his lifetime Loren Pope influenced not just a generation of guidance counselors and admission professionals; he made a difference.



FRANK SACHS has been a teacher and counselor in both public and private schools for 39 years. His last 30 years have been at The Blake School (MN) as the director of college counseling and where he continues to teach US Constitutional Studies. He is a past president of both Minnesota ACAC and NACAC (2005).

Affiliate Achiever

Charles Scott, *Captain, Academic Counselor*

New Mexico Military Institute, Roswell, NM • Rocky Mountain ACAC

What is a typical day like?

“Typical day” and “school counselor” don’t flow together in the real world... when I schedule my day, I usually have to throw that out the door because the unexpected comes around the corner. But here is a snapshot of what one of my days could look like:

Like most of the rest of the world, I start off by emailing. I have credit questions from students and from others whose dropped classes were still on their schedule. Next I work on drafts of recommendation letters, interspersed with students dropping in for their four-year-plan meetings. I attend a Performance Review Board for one of my students who is in danger of being suspended for tobacco use and then meet with the registrar

to reconcile our information regarding credit information for graduating seniors.

After lunch, I continue with student meetings, Secondary School Reports and recommendation drafts. As the Blue & Gold Officer for Southeastern New Mexico, I am also responsible for scheduling interviews with the 23 area students seeking a nomination to the Naval Academy. While these interviews occur in the afternoon and on weekends, I have to correspond with the high school and junior college students during the day. In the midst of my daily activities, I learn our department will be moving offices to another building in the very near future!