

## Establishing the Right Perspective Regarding College Admissions

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Each fall, almost like clockwork, there is an explosion of activity in the media surrounding the college admissions process. It seems every commercial and public news organization does at least one story on the competitiveness of college admissions. In this frenzied environment, reporters and commentators talk primarily with the deans of admission at the most selective institutions in the country. They depict the process as being universally competitive with every college and university rushing to deny admission to as many applicants as possible. This mania to be as selective as possible, they often opine, is driven by the pervasive rankings which they surmise have infected the admission decisions at most schools. This representation, however, does a great disservice to students, parents and counselors because most colleges are not highly selective (and probably never will be), and most are unaffected by rankings. Yet that is not the story the media wants to tell.

In September 2001 James Fallows wrote an article “Early-Decision Racket” for the *Atlantic Monthly*, which fueled the perception that the only way to gain admission to a college or university was to apply as an early candidate. He went on to indict the process as being inherently unfair and as a mechanism for colleges to drive down their acceptance rate and increase their yield. The topic quickly became the subject of television and radio talk shows, professional meetings of the College Board and the National Association of College Admissions Counseling, and more. The overwhelming consensus was that Fallows was right, and that early decision programs unfairly give the advantage to students from private schools where the counseling tends to be more sophisticated and to children for whom financial aid is not a factor in their enrollment decisions. While there is some truth to this argument, it overstates the importance of the early process.

The release of Jacques Steinberg's *Gate Keepers*, the book in which a reporter details his experience at Wesleyan University as the staff proceeded through the admissions process, was this year's sensation. And again, it seemed that every news organization and talk show had to do a story about the topic of highly selective admissions. This phenomenon has been going on for years. There have been countless articles in the nation's news papers and nearly as many books from Michelle Hernandez's *A is for Admissions* to Rachel Toor's *Admission Confidential* a book about the college admission process at Duke University. That they all sell like hotcakes and the national buzz they generate about the going to college underscores our obsession with and the media's exploitation of a one-sided perspective of the subject. Regrettably, we end up doing a great disservice to the 1.3 million college bound students, their families and counselors. The proclivity to present college admissions as impossibly difficult serves only to sell more newspapers and books, and does little to make the transition from high school to college a meaningful and educational extension of students' academic, intellectual, personal and social development.

Spurred on by a relentless media barrage and sustained by many adults' inability to understand what is really important in the college going process, collectively we have robbed America's students of their senior year. Their focus has shifted from enjoying the academic and co-curricular opportunities they have worked so hard to achieve, to scheming and even obsessing about how to get into college. They no longer have the luxury of being high school seniors. Instead, they fixate on the December or April notification date as though that will define the quality of their four years in high school and validate them as individuals. It is almost as if all the hard work and dedication that preceded that last year had no meaning. Perhaps the most ludicrous part of it all is that the data is clear – the way the media is shaping our perspective about this critical life transition is simply wrong and misinformed, and very few voices have emerged to put the brakes on this runaway train.

Here then is the reality in which the media seems uninterested. For the vast majority of college bound American students, the process works, and it works well. According to data collected by Alexander Astin and his colleagues at

UCLA's Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), which annually surveys thousands of first-year college students, the percentage of students who say they have enrolled in their first choice school has traditionally been over seventy percent. This year it fell to sixty-nine percent, which may be a function of the increasing competition or average number of applications submitted per student, but the news is still quite good.

One also has to question the media's insistence on focusing on the nation's most selective institutions when, in fact, they serve a very small fraction of college bound students. In the fall of 2001, the last year for which there is data, *US News and World Report* Best Colleges edition listed eighty-nine colleges and universities with an admit rate of fifty percent or less. Considering that there are roughly twenty-five hundred accredited four years institutions of higher education in the United States, focusing, as the media does, on the most selective four percent presents a very warped sense of reality.

The same is true with the controversy regarding early decision. I remember James Fallows talking about early decision as though it was a pox on the college admissions process, and that the number of colleges and universities admitting thirty to forty percent of their class through the early process was going to grow to the point where the average student would have severely limited options. Frankly, nothing could be further from the truth. The reality is that the vast majority of schools in the United States are unable to emulate the practices of the most visible and selective schools in the country. Of course, reporters like Fallows would not know that because they don't do reports on the ninety-six percent of the colleges and universities that are doing most of the heavy lifting in making sure our nation's most talented students are getting high quality educations.

The reality is that the vast majority of students in this country are not ready or able to commit early to a school. Among other things, financial aid considerations at most private institutions make it unwise. Additionally, students change during the course of their senior year and what may seem like a clear first choice in October may be a third choice in May when decisions are released. The bottom line in the debate is this: most schools that have early decision do well if they can enroll ten percent of the class through such programs. If one were reading, watching and listening to the media in fall 2001, one would have had to conclude that not having an early commitment

in hand was tantamount to being left without a date on prom night. It is true that my colleagues in New England private secondary schools and affluent suburbs around Boston see a disturbingly high percentage of the class saying, “I want to go early, I just don’t know where,” and that piques the interest of the media, but the reality for most college bound students is quite different.

So then, what is the best way to keep the college admissions process in its proper perspective? As with any major decision, be sure to look carefully beneath the surface. The major news organizations want us to fixate on that four percent of the schools that have far more qualified applicants than they can admit. They don’t want college bound students and families to think about the schools like those described in Loren Pope’s book, *Colleges that Change Lives*. While Loren’s book is one of my personal favorites on the subject, it is just one of many that advise families to think critically about outcomes. Loren reminds us that one of the peculiar things about the United States is our tendency to evaluate the quality of a college by the profile of the enrolling students, not by what happens while students are enrolled.

The reality of college admissions is that most schools work very hard to recruit students who are a good fit. We care deeply about each student’s capacity to take advantage of our faculty, facilities, relationship with fellow students, co-curricular programs and setting. If one takes a look at the happiest and most successful individuals in the country, one quickly understands that no school has a corner on the market. The secret that the media works very hard to keep from the public’s eye is this: the college going process works very well for the vast majority of students in this country. Whether a student attends a school that admits ten percent or ninety percent of the applicants, if the student and school are a good fit, then the chances that the student will move successfully and confidently on to the next stage of her or his career are excellent.