College Admissions

When we had two home unschooled children looking at colleges and visiting many of those they were considering, my family had lots of opportunities to observe the admission process and reach conclusions about how it might be done better. Here are some of them

A Simple Suggestion

One of the skills colleges are looking for in their incoming students is the ability to write. Currently, they have two ways of judging it. One is the short essay that is part of the SAT writing exam, the other the collection of essays required as part of a college application.

The SAT essay is written in pencil by students whose previous writing experience is probably on a word processor. It is graded by the sort of mechanical standards that you have to use if you want comparable measures for hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of essays graded by (I'm guessing) tens of thousands of graders.

Application essays have a different problem — the college has no way of knowing who wrote them. They may represent the work of the student, they may represent the work of his parents, they may represent the work of an admissions adviser paid by the parents to help get their kid into a good school. Even if the student played some role in the writing, the college has no way of knowing how much what they are getting reflects his ability, how much editing by others.

There is a simple solution to this problem, one which no college I am aware of has used: Have the applicant write an essay that they know is his. Put him in a room with a word processor — also pen and paper for those who prefer to write that way — and a short list of possible topics. Give him an hour and see what he produces. That should sharply distinguish applicants who can write coherent and grammatical English prose from those who cannot and, less sharply, identify the minority who are actually good writers.

The mechanics of the proposal should be straightforward. Many applicants visit the colleges they are applying to, take a campus tour, attend a presentation by the admissions office, perhaps have an interview. For those, all that are required are a few rooms in the admissions office provided with computers.

What about students who do not visit, perhaps because they live far away? Colleges sometimes use their alumni, conveniently scattered across the country, to interview applicants. Alumni have computers. Arrange, in each region of the country from which students apply, for at least one alumnus to invite applicants to demonstrate their writing ability. Once such arrangements become common, it should be possible to do the same thing in a more organized form, with someone in each major city in charge of supervising essays on behalf of any college that wants them.

When I put up a blog post along these lines, two commenters argued that my concern with essays written by admissions advisors was misplaced. One reported, from people he knew in the field, that most of the essays are abominably bad, hence must have been written by the student applying. Another wrote:

> I've read hundreds of admissions essays, and they were definitely written by high school kids (or parents who happen to write like they're still in high school).

We may be looking at different parts of the market. Students trying to get into Stanford or Harvard put a lot of effort into the project. Many of them are from well off families who can afford to pay for expensive tutoring intended as test prep for the SAT exam, as well as other services to improve their odds. I have not been able to find any data on how many students use what services, but a search of the web found quite a lot of ads. For example:

> Prior to writing, the student, with Craig's support, develops an outline for the essay. Craig then reviews the outline and offers suggestions for improvement.
>
> With this roadmap in hand, the student generates a first draft of the essay and submits that to College Essay Solutions. Craig then provides comprehensive notes on the draft, written directly on the document to avoid misinterpretation. Input covers everything from writing basics to clarifying complex concepts to presenting the student in the most positive light possible. Here and throughout the process, the student remains the author of the essay and all notes are couched as suggestions.
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> This procedure continues, with no limit on time or number of drafts, until the student, and Craig, is confident that the essay has reached its highest potential.
>
> If desired, Craig will review the essay one final time, immediately before submission.

The ad included a report of customer feedback:

> Following our daughter's acceptance to her first choice school, she received a personalized letter from the Dean of Admissions complimenting her on her application essay. Among other things, he wrote that it "reflected a level of maturity and clear thinking" he had rarely seen. Thanks, Craig, she could not have done it without you!
>
> Marilyn M.
> Parent

Another advisor, College Essay Mentor, informs potential customers, for all I know truthfully, that:

> My approach to college essays is the product of my work as a journalist at The Economist and The Wall Street Journal, as the author of two books, and as an editor for other professional writers.

Doing Sleepovers Better

Student sleepovers provide information to the prospective student that is both valuable and likely to influence the final decision, but there is a lot of noise in the signal. The information is valuable because it gives the prospective student a feel for the student society in which she will be immersed for four years if she goes there. It is noisy because student society varies a good deal even within a single college, and what part of it she gets exposed to depends on who her "sponsor," the student whose dorm and room she is doing the sleepover in, happens to be.

It follows that a college could increase the number of students who choose to go to it by investing more resources in matching sponsor and prospective student. Some attempt to do so, as judged by conversations I had at two of them. On the other hand, at least one of the schools my daughter

visited did a spectacularly bad job and one a spectacularly good job, with the result that the latter ended up as her first choice.

Of course, there may be schools with ideological reasons not to engage in such matching. If a prep school prospective student reacts badly to a host from the inner city, or a football fan is put off by a Shakespeare quoting host, that may be viewed by some schools as evidence of too narrow a type for them to want, however good his or her SAT scores and grades. There may even be schools which see the sleepover as an opportunity to educate the visitor by exposing him or her to a different sort of person. The former, at least, is not a wholly unreasonable position, although I would be inclined to see it as an attempt to keep down the intellectual diversity of the student body, hence a negative, not positive, signal.

The school where my daughter most strongly felt that her host and her friends were her sorts of people, the sorts who spent their free time talking and singing, not watching television, was also the one where she most felt that her own multiple oddities were seen by the students she met as interesting, assets not liabilities. In her perception, that particular student society was the one that appreciated diversity — in the sense relevant to an academic environment, not the usual sense of a euphemism for affirmative action.

Unfortunately, her first choice did not accept her. She ended up at the school that had paired her with a sponsor who saw watching game shows on television as the obvious way to spend free time, discovered it to be an ideological monoculture obsessed with politics, and transferred out after her second year.

Why Don't Universities Sell Admissions?

Or do they?

It would be a mistake for schools, especially elite schools, to allocate places entirely on the basis of price, for at least three reasons:

1. Part of what schools are selling is a credential, and part of that credential comes from having been admitted. An employer prefers, *ceteris paribus*, employees able enough to have gotten into Harvard or Chicago. He has no reason to prefer ones whose parents were rich enough to have bought a place at one of those schools.

2. The value to students of attending a school depends in part on the school's reputation, which depends in part on the quality of students admitted in the past. By basing admissions on measures of applicant quality the school may be able to raise average student quality, thus raise the performance of its graduates, thus raise the value of the school to future applicants.

3. Students are both customers and inputs. Smart students prefer an environment with other smart students and probably learn better in such an environment. A smart student provides positive externalities to fellow students and thus, indirectly, to the school, a dumb student provides negative externalities.

All of these explain why schools give some weight to measures of student quality in deciding whom to admit. None of them explain why they give no weight at all to willingness to pay. A student is worth more to the school the more able he is, but not infinitely more. Even if student quality is the only thing schools care about, additional money could be used to offer more generous scholarships to able students who would otherwise go elsewhere, raising average quality. So one

would expect schools to be willing to trade off, at some rate, money against SAT scores, agreeing to admit somewhat less qualified applicants at somewhat higher prices.

So far as I can tell, they do not do so. The reason might be internal ideology — elite schools for the most part are rich nonprofits, in a position to sacrifice financial benefits in order to act in ways that those running them approve of. It might be other people's ideology — schools may fear that the policy I suggest would be seen as a corrupt favoring of the undeserving rich over the deserving poor. Everyone recognizes that wealth confers advantages on those who have it — that is, after all, the point of acquiring wealth — but many people object to it doing so in things they think important, such as health care or education.

On commenter on my blog pointed out that merit based scholarships can be viewed as a way of selling admission, since they result in the less qualified applicants being charged a higher price. But many schools at present claim that all or most of their scholarship money is need based rather than merit based. If so, they are charging a higher price to the students who can pay it, but not to students who they would be unwilling to admit at the ordinary price. That is price discrimination, not the sale of admissions slots.

Legacy Admissions

While schools may not preferentially admit those willing to pay more, many schools do preferentially admit the children of their alumni. That could be viewed as a covert way of doing what I have just argued that schools do not do — selling admission. Applicants are instructed to list on their applications any alumni among their close relatives. Alumni offices keep track of alumni donations; that information can be provided to admissions officers.[1] As one commenter on my blog pointed out, converting a tuition payment into a donation to a non-profit college makes it tax deductible. Another commenter pointed at evidence of a link between donations and admissions.

> There is strong evidence that alumni of selective universities *believe* that donations will increase the likelihood of their children being accepted to the university. Empirically, the presence of children increases an alumnus's giving; giving drops off after the admissions decision; and the decline is far greater when the child is rejected. See Jonathan Meer & Harvey S. Rosen, "Altruism and the Child Cycle of Alumni Donations," 1 *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 258 (2009).
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> The alumni of selective universities tend to be savvy, and it is likely that they communicate with one another. It seems doubtful that this perception would last if it did not have a basis in reality.

A more indirect link between legacy admissions and selling admissions was suggested by another commenter. The parents of current applicants graduated at a time when college was largely restricted to the well off. That plus graduation from an elite school signals wealth, which means that their children will not qualify for need based scholarships, which means that they will end up paying the college more, which is a reason to favor them in admissions. It is a clever argument, but it implies that Harvard should favor the children not only of its alumni but of Yale alumni as

[1] For a discussion of such issues at the University of California, where favorable treatment seems to have gone to not only donors but applicants connected with university staff, see: https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/09/23/audit-blasts-admissions-university-california

well and that Chicago, historically less a preserve of the upper classes than either of the others, should favor Ivy League alumni over its own. That does not seem to be what actually happens.

Are there other reasons for legacy admissions? One possibility is that the school thinks of itself as having a particular culture, wanting a particular sort of people. Its alumni, having been not only selected to fit into that culture but instructed for four years in it, are likely to be that sort of people, making their children more likely to fit in.

Another possibility is tribalism. Humans tend to divide the social world into ingroup and outgroup, us and them. One basis for such a division is what school one went to, a fact dramatically demonstrated at college football games. The people running a school and its alumni are part of the same ingroup. Admission can be seen as a benefit given to those admitted, and people naturally prefer to allocate benefits to us instead of to them. It is prudent to include in the ingroup those most likely to be loyal to it. If Harvard admits the son of a Yale graduate, can he be trusted to cheer for the right team?

Cookie-cutter Elites

> "There is no single academic path we expect all students to follow, but the strongest applicants take the most rigorous secondary school curricula available to them. An ideal four-year preparatory program includes four years of English, with extensive practice in writing; four years of math; four years of science: biology, chemistry, physics, and an advanced course in one of these subjects; three years of history, including American and European history; and four years of one foreign language."
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> (From Harvard College Admissions)

When my son was getting ready to apply to college, we collected a good deal of information about colleges he might apply to. One thing that struck me was the degree to which the elite liberal arts colleges almost all asked for the same thing in their applicants: a standardized record of academic accomplishment whose production will have consumed most of the educational opportunities of four years of high school. My experience visiting colleges that he was thinking of applying to reinforced the impression I had earlier gotten from web pages — that what Harvard (and, *mutatis mutandis*, Vassar and ...) wanted were students who decided, at age fourteen, that their highest priority for the next four years was doing whatever it would take to get into Harvard. My experience many years later, as an alumnus volunteer interviewing Harvard applicants, was that they had a lot of takers, students who had taken the standard list of high school classes plus a long list of AP courses, many of no interest to them.

Despite the initial disclaimer, the description of an "ideal four-year preparatory program" implies a pretty uniform picture of the ideal student. It is a picture that any reasonably intelligent and hard-working student should be able to fit — provided that he is more interested in getting into Harvard than in getting an education.

Reading? Four years of English will include lots of it, almost all selected and required by someone else, a pretty good way of persuading a student that reading is something only to be done when someone makes you do it. One Harvard applicant I talked with told me that when he was younger he read a lot and wrote lots of stories, but that now he didn't have time. He justified the sixty-three hours a week he estimated that he spent on classes and homework on two bases — doing it gave him a feeling of accomplishment, and it would get him into college. Asked for things he had

learned in past classes and still knew that would be useful to him, he had a hard time coming up with examples.

Science? There are, perhaps, high school age kids who are interested in every science offered by their school, or at least able to fake it. But they are less likely to make a real world contribution than the enthusiast who reads up on relativity and quantum mechanics when he is supposed to be studying Dickens — and thinks biology is icky.

Studying a language is for some people an interesting intellectual activity; speaking a foreign language can be a useful skill. But the world is full of interesting things to do and skills to learn. This particular skill is well short of essential for someone living in the middle of some three hundred million English speakers, so why make it the key to Harvard — in preference to the ability to build furniture, or write sonnets, or survive in the woods, or do emergency first aid?

It is a poorly hidden secret that the reason professors give multiple choice tests is that, whatever their limitations as a tool for measuring learning, at least they are easy to grade. The attitude seems to have trickled down to the admissions officers. Make sure there is a check mark in each box. Perhaps I am being unfair — I have not discussed my reaction with any professional admissions officers. But reading those web pages left a bad taste in my mouth.

That, I suspect, is how the current pattern developed, but it didn't work. Having set a collection of measurable requirements that any reasonably bright student who really wanted to get in could meet, the top schools were left with far too many applicants who met them. The solution was to look for students who had done something special. Performing at Carnegie Hall would do it, or winning a national math contest, or being a chess grand master at seventeen, but there were not enough of those to fill the entering class of the elite schools, and they were quite likely to be people who had been too busy with what they cared about to take all the right courses. They might even be people who didn't want to go to Harvard.

A few years before my daughter went to college, she decided that she might want to be a librarian, so volunteered to work for free at a large local library. After a week, they thanked her and told her that her term of volunteering was over. Pretty clearly, their assumption was that she was volunteering because her high school required her to or to get something to claim on her college application, and it was now someone else's turn.[2] I mentioned that experience in a conversation with a stranger sitting next to me in an airplane flight, and she told me that she had been involved in admissions for her college, I think as an alumna volunteer, and there were boxes to check for that sort of thing as well.

Goodhart's law holds that when a measure becomes a target it ceases to be a good measure. In a world where the only reason to volunteer to work at a library, or help out at a homeless shelter, or spend a summer somewhere in the third world in some high school age equivalent of the peace corps, is that you want to do it, doing such things provides useful information about you. In a world where college admissions officers are looking over applications to find something that makes this student stand out from the others, it may only be evidence that you really want to get into an elite college and have the resources necessary to fake it.

[2] Checking the web page for the library district, I found a form for teen volunteers. It included: "Do you need to complete these hours for school? If so, how many hours do you need and by what date do you need to complete them?"

Merit Scholarships, the Absence Of

A number of the schools we visited with our children claimed to have very generous financial aid programs based on need, but no merit based scholarships at all. How and why?

Why the schools, collectively, would want such a policy is pretty clear. Bidding against each other for the very best students — which is what merit based scholarships amount to — is costly. From a financial standpoint, they are better off if they all refrain. From an ideological standpoint, I expect most of those involved in the process would rather spend their money on smart poor students than on very smart rich ones.

But what is in the collective interest of all is not necessarily in the private interest of each. Schools benefit by having extraordinarily good students, and even the Harvards and Vassars of the world do not have an unlimited supply of such. Brilliant students are fun to teach, which makes the school more attractive to potential faculty. They create intellectual excitement, which makes it more attractive to applicants. And, with luck, they end up with fame and/or fortune, some of which may get shared with their alma mater. If all the elite schools refrain from the bidding they save a good deal of money and lose only to the extent that some brilliant students who can afford Harvard decide to go to some less elite but more generous school instead. That should not be too much of a risk if the lack of generosity applies only to students whose parents can afford Harvard without financial aid.

But if an individual elite school breaks ranks, it has the opportunity to push itself even higher in the select company of elite schools. The logic is very much the same as in an ordinary cartel agreement. All firms in the industry benefit by keeping output down and prices up, but each firm benefits even more if the others follow that policy while it cuts prices a little and expands output a lot. The obvious suspicion is that what I am observing is cartel pricing, that some subset of elite schools that believe they are competing mostly against each other, have made an implicit agreement to refrain from competing for potential students who are both extraordinarily able and financially well off.

About twenty-five years ago, eight Ivy League schools were accused by the Justice Department of just such an arrangement, of sharing information on student applicants, agreeing not to offer merit based scholarships, avoiding competition for the best students. The controversy was settled by a consent agreement in which the schools agreed to a variety of things, including ending the annual meetings at which they, along with 15 other schools in the Northeast, discussed, the financial aid applications of students that had been accepted by more than one of the schools in order to coordinate their offers. My observation of current financial aid policy suggests that at least some of the schools involved may have continued the same practices in a less visible form.

Assuming that that is what is going on, what are the implications, aside from the possibility of future collisions with the Justice Department? The obvious one is that wealthy schools will be a little richer and wealthy parents of very smart kids who want to go to those schools a little poorer; off hand I do not see anything particularly bad (or good) about that.

The less obvious one is that the position of elite schools, at least the ones refusing to compete for top students, will be a little less secure. A few years ago, when my daughter was looking at colleges, Saint Olaf was among those she seriously considered. One thing that struck us in the process was an email from their admissions officer, informing us that by applying a little earlier

our daughter could be considered for a merit scholarship. Saint Olaf was, and is, a school a little below the level of Harvard, Vassar, and the like — and trying to work its way up.

A second thing that struck us about that particular interaction was something I mentioned earlier in chapter XXX in the context of home unschooling. The reason the admission officer gave for sending the email was that our daughter was home schooled and Saint Olaf had found that home schooled students were sometimes very well qualified, hence potential recipients of merit scholarships.

That was very nearly the opposite of the reaction we were getting from other schools, whose attitude was that they were willing to consider home schooled students but not at all sure how to handle their applications, and would much prefer that such applicants do their best to obtain conventional credentials by taking some graded courses somewhere, anywhere, before applying. It was the admission officer at Saint Olaf who told us that what blew them away was the list our daughter included in her application of books she had read—four hundred of them.

All of which suggests that the indirect effect of the policies of the elite schools may be to open up the high end of American collegiate education to a little more competition. Which might be a good thing.