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Our Universities: Admissions Standards

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Our Universities: Admissions Standards

Admissions standards and requirements are changing. Student and family expectations are likewise in flux. Responsible leadership recognizes the complexities playing on the mind and heart of students. Honesty, rather than twisting trepidation and apprehension into enrollment and cash flow, is more necessary than ever.

“Colleges are capitalizing on the deep anxiety and ambitions of parents and the hopes of their children that are tied directly to the prestige of a school,”

Mitchell L. Stevens, associate professor, Stanford Graduate School of Education

Last week, ***The Atlantic*** ran a story by Phoebe Maltz Bovy, *“The False Promise of ‘Holistic’ College Admissions.”* Holistic admissions processes go beyond student ACT scores, class ranks, courses taken and grade point averages and even extra curricula activities. Holistic admissions requirements often include soul-baring personal essays and pleas for consideration.

You may recall JFK’s famous Harvard application treatise: It read, in part, *“Then too, I would like to go to the same college as my father. To be a ‘Harvard man’ is an enviable distinction, and one that I sincerely hope I shall attain.”* In this case, young Mr. Kennedy’s 1935 revelations were in response to a simple question on the Harvard form that asked, *“Why do you want to come to Harvard? (The committee will expect a careful answer to this question.)”* This represents an early manifestation of holistic admissions.

Colleges purportedly use holistic admissions to admit a wider range of students. But holistic admissions allow, for example, legacy considerations as was the case of Joe Kennedy’s son gaining favorable consideration as a birth right. Potentially, a student with appropriate political connections might be positively perceived. This was the case not too long ago at the University of Illinois. Innumerable permutations exist in the name of holistic consideration. Some even seem socially worthy, e.g. to ensure a representative class composition.

The number of high school graduates prepared for college is declining, creating relentless competition for students. With freshmen’s pockets bulging with loans to pay the bills, holistic admissions might become a dulling euphemism for sub-standard admissions. Universities sans standards are substandard.

And there is a trickle-down effect. Many high schools have stopped ranking academic performance, some even refusing to declare a valedictorian. Those not in the top half of

their class, or the all-but-one who are not valedictorians, will not feel too badly about themselves.

Harvey C. Mansfield, a faculty member at Harvard for five decades, created a stir when he questioned the status quo: The average grade last year in the College of Arts and Sciences was an A-.

Some schools are tightfisted with A's. According to a ***CBS Money Watch*** piece by Linda O'Shaughnessy a few years ago, MIT, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Princeton, and Auburn University were among the most difficult places to earn an A. One of them is pretty tough on the gridiron too.

When universities make admission decisions based on factors that put academic preparation and prowess in the back seat, they are on soft ground and subject to criticism for prejudice and patronage.

Recently I talked with a student in the top 15% of her class, with a 3.6 GPA, and college prep courses under her belt. However, her ACT score was low. I made a professional judgment call — maybe a holistic admission decision — that she could be successful in our program, and threw out the test score. I don't need a soul-baring essay or deep revelation about her views of the world. I talked with her, looked at her academic history, and made a decision based on facts and professional assessment. Unfortunately, this doesn't describe most holistic admission processes.

University actions that minimize academic performance undermine purpose and diminish benefit to the individual and society.

In our universities, the grooming of the freshmen class holistically might make sense to create a representative group who meet standards, but if the review exists to augment student census regardless of ability and cash flow, it is damaging and ill-considered.