

The Gatekeeper of Higher Education: A Historical Analysis of Collegiate Admissions Practices

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Abstract

Admissions policies in higher education follow a cyclical pattern of change, all in the name of fairness. In colonial colleges, an admissions decision was entirely test-based. In the end of the nineteenth century, colleges began using secondary school marks and completely removed test scores from the decision. A century later, standardized tests entered the process again with the SAT and ACT. Today, accusations of inequality and bias in testing are causing reevaluation in admissions practices. Institutions accept applications sans test scores, and a few are accepting students without transcripts. Admissions policies are once again in transition, following the historical pattern.

Admissions Today

Before a high school student becomes a college student, they must pass the first real test of higher education: gaining admission into an institution. Admissions practices in American higher education have been changing since the middle of the nineteenth century. Today, that generally consists of submitting a high school transcript, SAT or ACT scores, and an essay. This method of admissions, which seems standard to most applicants and members of the academe, has only been standard for less than five decades, and may not remain much longer.

Standardized tests, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT) are labeled as biased toward wealthy students and white students, offering an unbalance in admissions and scholarship eligibility. Similarly, there is a bias toward students who attend more affluent schools, because they have access to more competitive programs, such as AP and IB courses. This skews admissions decisions, and scholarship awards in their favor. This unfair advantage goes directly against the evolving purpose of American higher education, which is currently open access rather than selectivity.

Admissions practices are progressing in reaction to this shifting goal. Institutions are turning away from the status quo to a more holistic admissions process. Many institutions have instigated some sort of test-flexible admissions policies, in which standardized tests are either optional or used for varying purposes other than standard admissions decisions. Some have gone so far as to create transcript-optional admissions. Though rare, it could become to norm before too long.

History of Admissions

Admissions policies have come a long way since Harvard first opened its doors to Colonial settlers. In fact, there were no recorded admissions policies at Harvard until 1642

(Broome, 1903). Harvard admitted students as the president of the university saw fit, and he was usually the one to administer the admissions exam. Most other institutions followed suit behind Harvard, aligning admissions practices after the English Universities, Oxford and Cambridge (Broome, 1903).

Original Admissions Standards

The first recorded admissions requirement at Harvard was a single paragraph, written in the 1642 catalog in Latin (Broome, 1903). Applicants had to translate the paragraph into English, as a written exam administered by the university president or one of the institutions tutors. As Broome (1903) recorded in English, the paragraph read:

When any scholar is able to read Tully or such like classical Latin Author ex tempore, and make and speake true Latin in verse and prose, suo (ut aiunt) Marte, and decline perfectly the paradigms of nounes and verbes in ye Greeke tongue, then may hee bee admitted into ye college, nor shall any claime admission before such qualifications. (p. 18)

As Broome (1903) notes, the term “suo Marte” was rarely translated, but it means “without assistance” or “on one’s own.” Additionally, applicants must have met a code of conduct. Most other institutions, such as Yale and William and Mary used the same admissions process, using the same paragraph, almost verbatim (Broome, 1903). Yale, being a religiously founded school, required a religion test as a basis of admissions as well.

The only requirement was fluency in Latin and Greek. At William and Mary, additional requirements for applicants were that they must be male and they must be at least fifteen years old (Broome, 1903).

Though the admissions requirements were listed in the catalogs of the institutions, they were not clearly adhered to. As quoted by Broome (1903), the president of William and Mary in 1727, Lyon G. Tyler, wrote in a letter “entrance examinations of any kind were not much considered in any of the Southern Colleges” (p. 25). While some applicants had to sit in the president’s office and transcribe the paragraph, not all were required to do so. In addition, even those who did not pass the test were usually admitted (Broome, 1903).

Nineteenth Century Admissions

Boys in the nineteenth century that intended to go to college attended prep schools, or were taught by private tutors, and were only instructed on the subjects likely to come up in an entrance examination (Broome, 1903). The trend in admissions at this point had moved away from written examinations. Universities were beginning to offer oral admissions examinations, administered again by the university president (Broome, 1903).

With new institutions teaching new subjects, universities had to adapt their admissions policies to cater to the new fields of study. By 1800, oral entrance exams proctored and assessed by each individual institution included: English grammar, algebra, geometry, ancient history, physical geography, English composition, U.S. history, physics, chemistry, and astronomy (Broome, 1903). Southern and western universities maintained similar admissions policies to their northeastern counterparts. The University of Georgia took their admissions policies verbatim from Yale’s catalog (Reed, 1949).

As the population of the United States grew, so did the population of boys who desired to go to college. Affluent families were sending their sons to secondary schools, at which they learned nothing other than how to pass entrance examinations. This gave less wealthy students a disadvantage as far as admissions into a university, regardless of their academic prowess.

In 1871, the University of Michigan changed the face of college admissions by establishing the *diploma system* (Broome, 1903). They created an accreditation system with the local secondary schools in which a diploma from an accredited school guaranteed admission into the University of Michigan, and required no admissions test from these applicants (Broome, 1903). This system was the original test-flexible admissions policy, and the first to require transcripts or an applicant to complete a secondary school program. At the time, this was considered the fairest form of assessment, basing the admissions decision on four years of academic performance rather than one test (Broome, 1903). This process caught on quickly, and over the next sixty years, the diploma system became the standard for college admissions.

Twentieth Century Admissions

In 1901, admissions representatives came together to create the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB), and created a standard admissions exam for all college applicants. This exam, though modernized, still included Latin translations (The 1901 College Board, n.d.). During World War II, Robert Yenkes gave a standard test to military recruits, and this test was first administered to college applicants in 1926 (History of the SAT, n.d.). This test, dubbed the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), was entirely optional for college applicants for the next nine years.

In 1935, Harvard began to require all applicants to take this test, and within five years, the SAT became the scholarship test for all the Ivy League Institutions (History of the SAT, n.d.). In 1942, the SAT became the only admissions test when all the other college board tests were eliminated (A Brief History, n.d.). Due to the popularity of IQ tests at the time, the SAT quickly became prevalent among admissions requirements.

In 1960, the University of California system became the first state higher education system to require all applicants to take the SAT (History of the SAT, n.d.). This test, like the admissions policy that came before it, was designed to create a fair and unbiased way to assess college applicants. Regardless of wealth or secondary school, all students were judged based entirely on their educational abilities.

In 1937, a group of admissions counselors created the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC). The gathering gave representative the opportunity to discuss matters relating directly to admissions processes. In their annual meetings, NACAC developed the first common practice for college admissions, established the difference between scholarships and financial aid, created application fees, and established the idea of external recruiting (Hoganson, 2012). In 1975, the Common Application was created, establishing one application students can fill out, and submit to multiple institutions (The Common Application, 2014). Today, over 500 institutions participate in the Common Application.

Current Admissions Debate

Though a lot has happened in admission policy over the past 300 years, not much has changed. Originally, admissions were based solely on the entrance exam given by the university president. Slowly, transcripts from accredited secondary schools began to replace test scores. Then, with the popularity of the IQ test, test scores were again factored into the admissions decision. Every time a new element was added or removed from the decision, it was done for the sake of fairness. Today, we see standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT being phased out of admissions processes again for the sake of fairness.

Standardized Test Score Bias

Current research into the SAT or ACT scores of high school students suggests that the tests are biased in favor of white, wealthy students. According to Zumbrun (2014), when students were broken down into categories based upon their family's income, each income bracket scored higher than the one below it. Those who come from a home making \$200,000 or more per year had an average score of 1722, while those who came from a home making between \$0-\$20,000 per year had an average score of 1324 (Zumbrun, 2014). Despite popular opinion, this is not simply about wealthier students being able to afford more test preparation. Some vocabulary words are easier for wealthier students to recognize. One example Zumbrun (2014) gives is the word "regatta." He explains a wealthy student from New England would be familiar with the term, due to social engagements, while a poor student from the Southwest would have to study and memorize the term (Zumbrun, 2014). Discrepancies like this were supposed to be fixed when the SAT was last reconfigured, but it is still biased.

The extent of this bias remains a point of contention. According to Jaschik (2010), "the College Board says that American society is unfair, but the SAT is fair" (para. 6). This is strikingly similar to the complaints of applicants in the nineteenth century. Many students claimed that admissions exams were unfair, and thus the diploma system was created. It seems college admissions have made an entire circle in regards to college admissions testing.

Test Flexible Admissions

Because of the unfair quality of standardized tests, many institutions have become test-flexible. This has become so popular in higher education today that fairtest.org has published a list of test-flexible institutions that is ten pages long (The National Center for Fair & Open

Testing, 2014). The term “test-flexible” describes a variety of testing policies. For example, some institutions only use the SAT or ACT for placement and advising. Others require the tests of certain applicants, like those applying to certain programs, those who do not have AP or IB credits, or those whose other credentials do not qualify them for admission (The National Center for Fair & Open Testing, 2014).

Other institutions require the SAT only for students who are applying from out-of-state, which is reminiscent of the University of Michigan policy from 1871. Some institutions are even creating their own school specific admissions test, which is how admission was originally granted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Admissions policies involving standardized tests are cyclical, and we are currently cycling out of a test-based environment.

Transcript Optional Admissions

Some institutions are going so far as to offer transcript optional admissions in addition to test optional admissions. Bennington College now gives applicants the option of submitting a traditional application, complete with transcripts and test scores, or creating an application portfolio (Jaschik, 2014a). As quoted in Jaschik (2014a), Bennington instructs applicants in regards to their portfolio:

We invite you to share with us a collection of your work that speaks to these capacities and creates a portrait of what you bring to the Bennington community. We invite you to be deeply thoughtful. We invite you to be bold. We invite you to bring your own dimension to the college application. (para 3)

Applicants can submit transcripts and test scores with their portfolio, but they are not required to do so.

Goucher College now allows applicants to submit a two-minute video in lieu of transcripts and test scores (Jaschik, 2014b). If they choose to do this, they must subsidize their video with two works from their high school career. They can be papers, projects, short stories, or any other kind of academic work. Goucher's admissions team claims the videos will be reviewed based upon substance, and not production value (Jaschik, 2014b). This opens the door for students to simply use their smart phone to create a two-minute video to apply for college.

The Future of College Admissions

Admissions offices at the Ivy League schools were probably appalled when the University of Michigan stopped offering entrance exams. However, it eventually established a new status quo in higher education. The same institutions that dropped testing as a requirement began using the SAT a century later. Soon, standardized tests in college admissions will once again be a memory, with admissions becoming more about the person than the student.

There is no perfect method to judge an applicant. In the past, experts have created many systems that claim to be "fair" and blind to anything but the applicant's academic ability. However, history has taught us that those who wish to succeed can corrupt any perfect system, such as the diploma method or SAT. Organizations such as NACAC and their regional affiliates can play a vital role in the ever-changing field of college admissions. In order to maintain balance and equality, they must remain aware of admissions practices. As an industry, admissions officers must keep an open mind when new methods arise. Most importantly, higher education must part with admissions measures once they become unreliable. College applicants will never cease to improve, so our admissions policies must follow suit.

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