

# Perception of the Profession

is a Cause for Concern

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Whether conversing with colleagues or listening to the media, I'm concerned with the current state of our profession. We live our professional lives at a breathtaking pace.

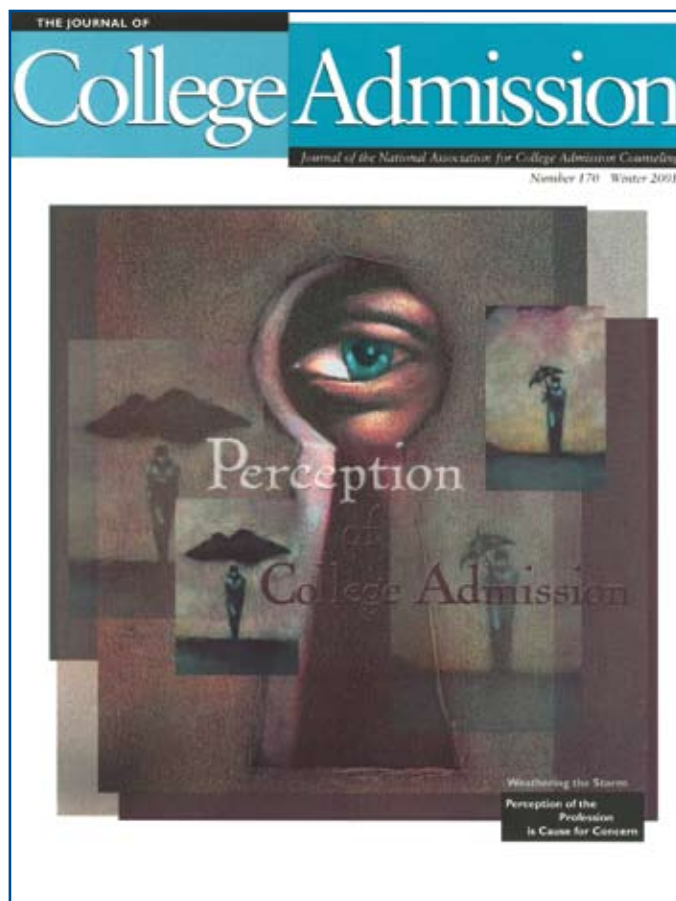
Years fly by amid a flurry of planning, travel, information sessions, application reading, and phone calls. One class is enrolled, and we are already working on the next one.

We are encouraged by a more favorable demographic outlook that we've known in 30 years. Over the next decade there will be a 10 percent increase in high school graduates in this country, taking us from 2.8 million students to 3.2 million students, a level not seen since 1979 when the number of high school graduates in this country peaked.

If the rising tide lifts all boats, it's not surprising that admission professionals see a prosperous future. But I believe our frenetic professional lives and the bright demographic

outlook have blinded us to cynicism and mistrust that students, families, and even high school counselors have for the admission process and for us as professionals.

We know the college admission process is a topic of conversation on the cocktail circuit in the poshest communities. We've witnessed a media determined to expose the marketing of higher education, the arbitrary nature of the admission process, imperious admission professional, the tendency of institutions to act in their own self-interest, the leveraging of financial aid, and the torment students and their families are experiencing.



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### BE READY FOR DISAPPOINTMENT: STUDENTS', PARENTS' AND YOUR OWN:

Those of us who have worked in college admission for 15 years or more know how much the process and the field have changed. Paper has been replaced with computers, counseling has been replaced with marketing, and the emphasis on fit has been replaced by a preoccupation with prestige, or perceived prestige, which we have manufactured.

Consider three examples of what I am describing. First, a counselor who responded to an email update we sent regarding our Early Action process excoriated colleges for the practice of deferring so many students in early admission programs. He wrote:

“This implies to me that the college wants to either let the student down easily, or that the college is manipulating the student for the college’s own gain—you might want to accept them in the future so you don’t want them to be totally cut loose, such decisions continue to support my belief that college is indeed an industry and uses the bottom line approach of any business.”

After I responded, he continued in the same vein:

“Colleges set not only the rules, but the tone of the admission process. And it is the tone that has changed over the years, from one of collegiality to one of aggressive marketing and corporate competition... it bothers me greatly to be placed in a situation that I have little control over, or in a situation where I am seen as not being manipulative enough or unwilling to play the game of selective colleges.”

Then, in a December 24, 1999 *Boston Globe* article, reporter Kate Zernike suggested that selectivity is an illusion cooked up by colleges to make themselves look good and to keep families off balance about the admission process. Consider the following excerpt from the article:

“The happy little secret of college admission is that a very large percentage of students get into one of their top choice colleges. But the college won’t tell you this, because it’s in their best interest to say this is a very competitive process.”

Richard Zeckhauser, professor of political economy at Harvard Kennedy School of Government (MA) , adds:

“Colleges want to look as selective as possible so they can ultimately attract a better pool of candidates... Admission officers privately concede that some schools will try to encourage applications, even from students they know don’t meet their standards, so they can reject more students, and look choosier... The more selective the colleges are, the more appealing they become. They start to attract the attention of students with better SATs and grades, which sends their rankings, and desirability higher... the frenzy feeds the frenzy... more applications means more rejections and thus the perception of greater selectivity.”

Finally, in the September 15, 2000 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Former Labor Secretary and current Brandeis

University (MA) Professor Robert Reich indicts selective college admission for reducing higher educational opportunity and increasing inequality in our country.

He refers to a summer *New York Times* article in which, “The father of one 11-year-old introduced the boy to a university admission officer, who advised him to take Spanish rather than Latin and to sign up for calculus as soon as possible.”

Reich’s central point, though, is:

“There is a danger that the current competitive rush toward selectivity will make it even less likely that the lower income children will gain access to higher education. That’s because college and university administrators have incentives to attract those whom they consider the best students, rather than accommodating more lower income students whose credentials and test scores do not add to an institution’s luster.”

These are sharp attacks on our profession and higher education. They point to a growing feeling among families, guidance counselors, and the media, that colleges are running a racket, behaving conspiratorially, and even damaging society. Clearly, we need to pay attention to public perception before our integrity is further tarnished.

Our profession is dealing with the consequences of intense marketing efforts initiated in the 1970s and 1980s to counteract the demographic challenges we would face in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We survived that period when application pools shrank, acceptance rates soared, and yields declined.

But we have not suspended the aggressive tactics that were implemented. We know from students, parents, and counselors that mounds of letters and four-colored brochures are thrown away unopened each year. Yet we lack the courage or the will to stop for fear we will be left behind. Our recruitment mailings viewed today like any other form of direct mail advertising. When Garry Trudeau is lampooning us in his *Doonesbury* comic, isn’t it time to reassess?

Our tactics are at least partially responsible for the pervasive superficiality of the college choice process. Rarely do we encounter students and parents with hard-core questions about quality of faculty, strength of department, intellectual climate, academic resources, opportunities for internships, fellowships, or career counseling. More frequently we hear questions about residence halls, food, social life, athletic facilities, off campus hot spots, and amenities for students. After all, we sell beautiful campuses with state-of-the-art facilities in great locations.

The composition, training and nurturing of admission staffs need to be examined. Unless we are hiring only recent graduates of our schools, how do new staff members gain first-hand knowledge of great faculty and the classroom experience, which they can present to prospect students? If they only know the sales pitch and the statistics, they can't promote the institution on its true merits and they won't be able to respond to families who have the right questions.

We all cringe at the college fair question, "How's your psychology department?" but how many times have we heard or given a meaningful response to it beyond just, "Oh, really outstanding."

Families form a poor impression of admission professionals who are unable to provide deeper insights into the nature and quality of the learning experience at their institutions, and this diminishes the credibility of our profession.

When we receive calls or letters from students or their parents who have not been admitted, do we respond with openness and sensitivity, or do we hide behind generalities and certain elitism?

This particular aspect of our work poses one of the greatest threats to how we are perceived as a profession. Delivering bad news is never easy, but the manner in which we deliver it can be constructive and consoling for the student or parent.

Our responsibility as professionals at this difficult time should be to have people leave the conversation no less disappointed, but comprehending a bit more and grateful that someone cared enough to listen and explain.

In talking about cost and financial aid, we need to know our numbers and explain them clearly to families. While it is fashionable to decry how college costs have exploded over the past 20 years, we in admission could defuse a lot of criticism by explaining how labor intensive the process of education is. For colleges to offer the highest quality education, they need to pay competitive faculty salaries, maintain and modernize their facilities, construct new buildings, and adapt to changing technology. These are expensive.

We should know that according to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, tuition charges cover only 60 percent of the cost of private higher education. The difference comes from endowment income, gifts and other revenue.

Yes, college costs are high, but colleges themselves are subsidizing a significant percentage of expenditures.

More importantly, we need to subscribe to a policy of full disclosure to families regarding our financial aid processes. Are we need blind in the admission process? Are students admitted early accorded the same treatment in the financial aid process? Do we use federal methodology or institutional methodology? Can we explain the difference? Do we award aid based on need, merit, or the achievement of our enrollment goals? What percentage of need do we meet? Are we awarding no-need or merit scholarships to some students, but not meeting the demonstrated need of others? What kinds of loan and work expectations will we have for students in the freshman year and then beyond that? What is the average indebtedness of graduating students from our institutions?

While I acknowledge that all colleges face pressure to meet enrollment and quality objectives, it is hard to justify gapping or denying aid to needy students while awarding scholarships to students who have little or no need.

The open invitation that many colleges make to negotiate or bargain for more financial aid, while understandable in a market economy, has diminished our professional integrity. We are all quick to criticize the arrival of [ecollegebid.com](http://ecollegebid.com), a Web site allowing families to bid on what they will pay for a college education to see if it will be accepted. But Jon Boeckenedt, vice president for enrollment at St. Bonaventure University (NY), delivered a logical assessment of this service on the NACAC e-list: "If the market is acting like education is something they can buy, it's because we've all given them signals to that effect."

Two other areas have to be mentioned in any honest assessment of our profession. While often glossed over or accepted as necessary evils, they can't be ignored. The fact that they are is yet another example of how we as professionals have become desensitized.

Regarding athletes, colleges with big-time sports programs admit them at best with academic profiles far from their established standards and at worst grossly underprepared or uninterested in meeting the demands of college level work. Yet, it is simply viewed as the cost of fielding teams that will provide exposure for colleges, and hopefully, positive publicity.

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And regarding development cases, there is usually grudging acknowledgement between the admission office and the guidance office that certain individuals will be admitted outside the profile because their parents, grandparents or someone who knows someone is either owed a favor or can make a contribution to the college.

Admission offices are not to blame for these situations, but they are the vehicles through which the desired ends are achieved. And there will always be students without athletic prowess and rich family connections who will be victimized. And what will they think of our profession?

Finally, it's easy to rail against the annual *U.S. News and World Report* ratings. We can quibble with the methodology, we can argue that it's not possible to compare such different institutions, and we can lament the unfortunate impact the ratings have on the way students and parents investigate college.

But love it or hate it, *U.S. News* fills a need. So few families know how to do good research, how to discern true quality and value in higher education, how to differentiate among so many colleges. And while I don't say *U.S. News* has the answers, it provides a starting point, a frame of reference.

My problem with *U.S. News* is how it affects our work. Some of the most eager readers of the *U.S. News* rankings are college trustees, most of whom are business professionals who think on bottom-line terms.

In the business world, benchmarking is the most popular way of determining how one company is doing against its competitors. So it is hardly surprising that the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings have prompted colleges to benchmark against competitors.

Now, instead of carving out their own missions and identities, their own niches in the vast landscape of higher education, colleges are striving to be like each other, or rather, like those that are rated better than they are. This homogenization of higher education makes our jobs more difficult, and it confuses families who are seeking the right "fit."

Last year the west coast, independent, for-profit, college counseling outfit, Achieva, ignited discussion across our profession. High school and college people denounced the enterprise as undermining our profession and hoodwinking unsuspecting families.

Achieva and independent counseling have purportedly sprung up because high school counselors are too overburdened to perform quality college counseling or because so

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many families have the disposable income to pay people to guide them through the process.

But we on the college side bear responsibility, too. As Bill Rubin, writing on the NACAC e-list, observed, "Everyone seems to decry that Achieva offers such services, all the while never conceding that there is a perception that such services are needed... Like it or not, the college counseling landscape is changing."

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I'm reminded of George Bernard Shaw's reflection on the times in which he lived: "All of our progress is but improved means to unimproved ends." With respect to the state of college admission, might we say that our progress is but improved means to far worse ends?

If we as a profession don't confront these issues, my worry is not so much that we will be viewed as duplicitous or pernicious, as the *Boston Globe* article implies. My worry is that we will become irrelevant.

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