



Attracting High Achieving Secondary Students through Early Admission Call-Up in an American Style College in Lebanon:

A Comparison with American Colleges

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Abstract

An early admission call-up was used to attract high-achieving students to a private university in Lebanon. The call-up, which is essentially an offer of admission before the student takes any formal steps, was administered to the top 25th percentile ranked students of main feeder schools at a private university in Lebanon. Data were accrued for students who applied for admission from 2000 to 2006. The early admission call-up was made in spring of 2006, the analysis compared the top 25th percentiles academically ranked students of previous years not given the early admission call-up. In addition, the analysis compared those below the 25th percentile score subgroup. Results showed that students who were given an early admission call-up enrolled at higher rates than those at the top 25th percentile rank in previous years. It was shown that those at the top 25th percentile score had higher high school averages as compared to candidates from previous academic years.

Introduction

Universities are generally committed to recruiting quality students and spend significant time and resources to maintain a well-developed coordination of planning, strategy development and implementation of recruitment activities targeted to attract and enroll quality students. This coordinated effort to enroll top-quality students is key because quality of students can improve the standards of the institution, forming its identity and character (Berger & Milem 2000). Thus, better performing students create a better academic atmosphere for students, faculty and, in turn, improve the university's reputation and impact the internal academic operation. (Harman 1994).

The challenge for many private universities is to select students who are most likely to succeed in college and make significant contribution to their field of study. The task is not only to select the right students but also to encourage these selected students to choose the particular university. With that in mind, the office of admission has developed numerous and on-going recruitment tools that are targeted to the specific needs of high school students—early visits to schools and early admission call-up were implemented to attract students to a university. Admission offices set enrollment goals, developed new recruiting strategies and recruitment programs all in an attempt to compete with other universities and secure the enrollment of top students.

One method used extensively in US universities is early

admission. This program allows students to apply early to the first-choice university with the hope of early admission. In return, the student agrees to commit and enroll at the university at an early stage in the application admission process. These programs are binding—if a student is accepted to a college through the early-decision process, he or she must rescind all applications to other colleges, and sign a contract to attend the college that granted early admission. By signing the contract, the student forfeits any chance to compare financial aid and enrollment packages from other institutions (National Association for College Admission Counseling 2001). Early admission is a vital institutional strategy used to recruit and enroll the most qualified students. In addition, early admission provides a variety of other services on a first-come-first-serve basis such as housing, financial aid or even a place in highly competitive programs such as engineering or medicine.

Typically, American-style universities in Lebanon admit students based on evidence of high school grade point average (GPA), entrance exam scores and class rank. These three main factors help admission officers build a composite score that constitutes an indicator to student performance. Many private universities, who follow the American-style universities, evaluate language skills, logical and mathematical abilities, through different high school disciplines. However, universities vary in their admission criteria and system. Criteria of higher education

institutions for admission varies widely, ranging from competitive examination to open admission.

Almost three decades ago, admission to universities in the Middle East was highly selective because of greater demand and low supply. In times of rapid changes, growth of higher education institutions has profoundly changed the admission criteria to the numbered universities that existed in the 60s and 70s. Admission and selectivity in most universities in Lebanon is somewhat lax. While a number of universities use a variety of means to select students based on school records and performance on standardized and international tests, many of them, whether located in Lebanon or in other countries in the Middle East, have opened their doors to students with substandard requirements. The mushrooming of American-style universities in Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East, such as in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) may seek the best students but settle for substandard requirements. Thus, using early admission is one way to attract students to non-competitive programs. In fact, little is known about early admission call-up and its impact within the academic performance of students in Lebanon and elsewhere. The main premise is that the early admission call-up encourages access to higher education among different sub-populations of students. It is hypothesized that these call-ups attract students to the university by affecting their initial choice and used as a marketing incentive to solicit better students.

For this study, the early admission call-up was used to attract students who have certain qualities desired in non-competitive admission environments. The early admission call-up allowed the university to call-up the top 25th percentile academically ranking students of top-feeder schools. The call-up was done through a letter that was sent to the school principal and distributed to the top 25th percentile academically ranking students. The letter indicated that if they apply early, a place will be reserved for them at the university once they complete their high school requirements. In a sense, early admission in this particular college in Lebanon is different in its function when compared to early admission in US universities. In the US early admission allows the student to apply early, be accepted early, and the student pledges to attend the university in reciprocation the university saves a place at the university. In Lebanon however, students do not have to commit to the university or pledge to enroll at the university that offers early admission. In fact students may be awarded early admission and enroll at another university.

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A follow-up with students who opt for early admission may exhibit different enrollment behaviors compared to the regular and voluntary admission process. The implementation of merit-based early admission process based on high school rank, i.e., grades, could likely affect student pathways to academic success and provide the university with increased enrollment of top-ranking students from secondary schools. The purpose of this study was to examine the pre-admission students who go through the early admission call-up in a private university in Lebanon for the 2007-08 academic years compared to previous academic years between 2000-07. The study compared those students who were ranked at the top 25th percentile in their school that were provided with an early admission call-up initiated in 2006-07 for the academic year 2007-08 with those at top 25th percentile in their schools who were not treated with the early admission call-up.

Data and Methodology

In 2006, all school principals of the main feeder schools¹¹ to a private university were sent a letter requesting them to supply the university a list of students at the top 25th percentile rank in their senior class. Once the list of students was received, in early autumn of the academic year 2006-07, these students were sent letters to their schools and handed out individually an early admission letter. The letters indicated that their “seat” at this private university was reserved, provided they fulfill the admission requirements. From the list of students ranked at the top 25th percentile who received an early admission call-up, 107 students applied to the university. These students were then followed to see if they enrolled or did not enroll. The data of the early admission call-up group were compared to a cohort group (n=443) of students who were not at the top 25th

¹ Main feeder schools is defined as being those which feed the largest number of students to this university over the past five years.

percentile rank of their secondary school class and who applied in the fall semester of the academic year 2007-08 from the main feeder schools. A cohort of the call-up group, those who enrolled, was also compared to a cohort of enrolled students who applied from previous years, since 2000-01 (n=1641) from the main feeder schools. The latter comparison was based on the percentage score of secondary school averages as grouped at the top and below the 25th percentile rank. The cohort for the 2007-08 academic year was used as the datum of comparison with the previous years.

Results

Enrolled/Not Enrolled with Early Admission Call-up Vs Non-Early Admission Call-Up

A count was calculated for those who enrolled or did not enroll for academic year 2007-08 crossed by a two-rank classification: the 25th percentile rank, and above 25th percentile rank students who went through the early admission call-up. The data showed that 77.5 percent of students who were at the top 25th percentile score enrolled at that private university. On the other hand, 79.45 percent of students below the 25th percentile rank (non-early admission call-up) enrolled (See Table 1).

Table 1: Early Admission Call-up by Enrollment for 2007-08

Early Admission	Did Not Enroll	Enrolled	Grand Total
Non-Early Admission Call-up (below the 25th percentile rank)	91	352	443
Early Admission Call-up (Above the 25th percentile rank)	24	83	107
Total	115	435	0

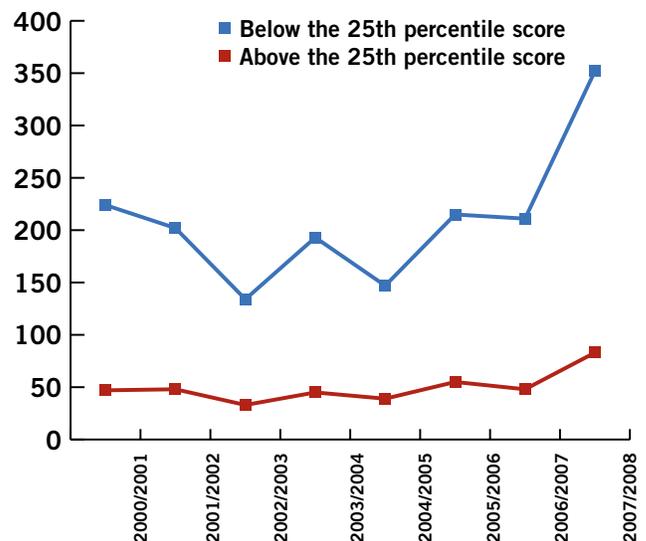
Number of Enrollees Above and Below the 25th Percentile Score

In the second analysis the growth rate of enrollees ranked above or below the 25th percentile score in their high school classes was calculated. The results showed that for the academic year 2007-08, students at the top 25th percentile rank (with early admission call-up) increased by almost 66.82 percent from 2006-07. Of the total number of students who came from the top-feeder schools (n=435) for the 2007-08 academic year, 20 percent of these students were ranked among the top 25th percentile rank in their high school class. In addition, the growth rate of this category of students was the highest, exceeding the 72 percent since the establishment of this private university. Table 2 and Figure 1 illustrate the data of enrollees according to their school rank.

Table 2: Longitudinal Count of Enrollees Above and Below Top 25th Percentile Score

Year	Below the 25th percentile score	% Growth	Above the 25th percentile Score	% Growth
2000-01	224		47	
2001-02	202	-9.82	48	2.12
2002-03	134	-33.66	33	-31.25th
2003-04	193	44.029	45	36.36
2004-05	147	-23.83	39	-13.33
2005-06	215	46.25th	55	41.02
2006-07	211	-1.86	48	-12.72
2007-08	352	66.82	83	72.91

Figure 1: Percentage of Enrollees Above and Below the Top 25th Percentile Score

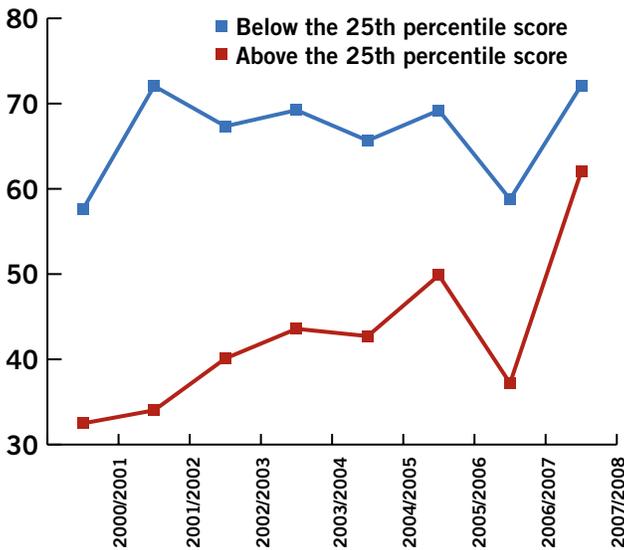


The number of students at the top 25th percentile rank in their high school class enrolled at the university has doubled compared with previous academic years. The results illustrated in Table 3 suggest a rise in student academic performance. The mutation of high school average of students ranked above the 25th percentile score after the early admission call-up which increased 14 high school average points when 2007-08 was compared to 2006-07. For students below the 25 percentile score, there has been a significant increase of 68 percent (from an average of 37.2 in 2006-07 to 62 in 2007-08) in the high school averages. Table 3 reports high school averages for those students who scored below and above the 25th percentile score.

Table 3: High School Averages Below and Above the Top 25th Percentile Score

Year	Below the 25th percentile score	Above the 25th percentile Score	Overall average
2000-01	32.49	57.60	36.81
2001-02	34.02	72.06	40.85
2002-03	40.10	67.34	44.57
2003-04	43.58	69.23	49.06
2004-05	42.72	65.66	46.10
2005-06	49.87	69.21	53.52
2006-07	37.20	58.78	41.44
2007-08	62.03	72.14	64.00

Figure 2: Trend line for the Longitudinal High School Averages of Students who Ranked Below and Above the 25th Percentile Score



The final analysis compared those students ranked at the top 25th percentile rank in high school that received the early admission call-up with the top 25th percentile score who did not receive the early admission call-up prior to 2007-08 academic years. Those who received the early admission call-up had the highest averages compared to the top 25th percentile group who did not receive the call-up.

Table 4: Comparison of High School Averages Based on Three Conditions

	No Early Admission Call-up (2000-06)	Early Admission Call-up (2007-08)
Rank below the 25th percentile score	39.95	
Rank above the 25th percentile score	65.64	72.14

Discussion and Conclusion

The implementation of merit-based early admission call-up on high school rank was effective in increasing enrollment of top-ranking students. For the past seven years high school averages of students who ranked below the 25th percentile score increased by 68 percent and were higher than students who were below the top 25th percentile score. It is clear that this university tried through the implementation of the early admission call-up strategy to start a quality check program designed to enroll “better” students. Indeed and as previously measured, 20 percent of the university top feeder school enrollees were at the top 25th percentile rank in their school. Given the severe competition among Lebanese universities looking for top-ranked students, early admission call-up not only attracted such students but also increased enrollment: those who applied to the university and received the early admission call-up were more likely to enroll than not enroll.

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Universities view this as a win-win situation. The student is certain of a placement at the university of his or her choice and the university is able to secure high-quality students. The dividends of a high-quality, successful student greatly impacts the economic returns gained through occupational success and career advancement. Students selected based on high performance have a greater potential to succeed in college and professional life. Thus, seeking top-ranking students is generally an investment to be seen in the life span of graduates, where

colleges reap the benefit from the success of these students in both economic and social terms.

The challenges of enrolling students at the top 25th percentile rank allowed students to remain enrolled and increase their performance. In fact, our data has shown that students admitted through early admission call-up has increased 14 high school average points from the previous academic year, i.e., new and incoming students have better high school averages than in previous years since the inception of the early admission program. Improving the quality of students often requires stronger academic programs and calls the university to commit itself to these better students. Avery, Zechauser, et. al. (2003) study explored these aspects in more than 500,000 college applicants and found that early admission practices have had a significant role in attracting students to top universities in the US. Early admission call-up may have the advantage over regular admission—on one hand it plays a dual role by changing the characteristics of the student body pushing the university to excel in designing its programs and curriculum. However, a drawback to early call-up is the possibility of leaving out borderline high school students who might not be identified early at the top 25th percentile rank but excel at a later stage. Second, those at the top percentile scores may not score at the top 25th percentile in the national exams or the standardized tests that are usually taken upon completion of secondary school in Lebanon and well beyond the period of pre-admission call-up. Thus, the early admission call-up is a reflection of how students do in their schools and not based on some national standard.

Many US universities still offer early admission and students pledge to enroll in the university that offered early admission, if accepted. In Lebanon such a pledge is not required, thus, having a different sense of early admission. In US style universities in Lebanon and the Middle East it is very hard to secure a commitment from students early in their senior year as their admission is tied to their success in national high school exams which are nationally administered and graded. Thus, the student may not know the completion of their high school degree until the start of summer at the end of their senior year. Early admission is processed in the fall of the senior year and thus students are not required to pledge to commit to the college. This type of early admission in a private university is known as the early action admission program, which is called early admission call-up in Lebanon.

Many universities in the US are opting to do away with early admission. There is clearly a need for college and university administrators to reflect upon and reexamine the use of early admission call-up programs focusing on the

positive and negative consequences. Studies that illustrate the fate of the majority of early-decision programs should be considered to determine if they will be maintained, replaced or modified. For example, some Ivy League universities in the US are now considering dropping early admission in that students tend to choose too soon their colleges so that neither the college nor the student may have the right commitment (Reingold, 2004). Yale University (CT) and Stanford University (CA) have dropped early admission programs. This movement to eliminate early admission in the Ivy League colleges has trickled down to many other US universities (Venegas 2006). However for many universities seeking to recruit top students, this might be just the right incentive to attract those students and entice them to apply and seek admission to a program of choice.

Early admission programs benefit students who are certain which college they want to attend regardless of what financial aid might be available from other schools. However, this seems to favor students from upper middle-class backgrounds especially for those students who attend affluent private or public schools high schools (Toor 2001). Furthermore, the argument could be made that early admission programs can be very advantageous to applicants depending on their academic record. A student who is certain of the university they would like to attend and has a somewhat strong record might receive early admission when this same student might not have been selected in the normal admission process.

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