

Selective College Admission:

COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESSES



anxious

strategy-driven

neurotic

manipulative

What Are We Willing To Give Up?

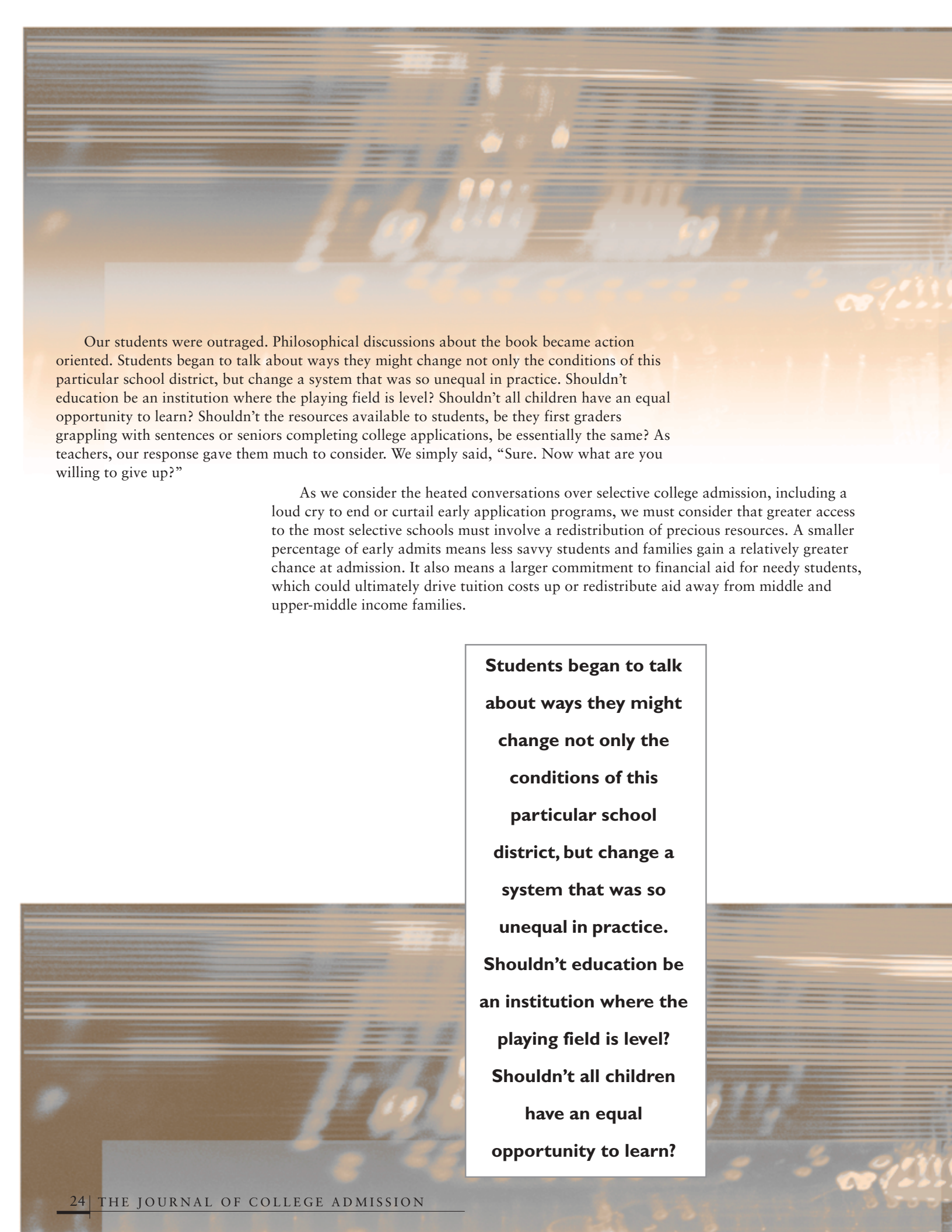
by Michael Chimes

Several years ago, I was co-teaching a course entitled “Race, Class and Gender.” Some 10 students attended the class, which was held in a private administrative office. Students shared a leather couch and comfortable chairs with two senior administrators as their teachers. We took field trips, listened to speakers, saw films, and discussed issues in an environment of trust and respect.

One of our readings for the course was Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*. The author offers both an observant lucidity and an outraged condemnation of the East St. Louis, Missouri school system. The education East St. Louis students received, according to Kozol, was as far from our idealized educational setting as school could be. There, teachers came and went, classes were overcrowded, basic learning materials were non-existent, and school buildings were dangerous.



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Our students were outraged. Philosophical discussions about the book became action oriented. Students began to talk about ways they might change not only the conditions of this particular school district, but change a system that was so unequal in practice. Shouldn't education be an institution where the playing field is level? Shouldn't all children have an equal opportunity to learn? Shouldn't the resources available to students, be they first graders grappling with sentences or seniors completing college applications, be essentially the same? As teachers, our response gave them much to consider. We simply said, "Sure. Now what are you willing to give up?"

As we consider the heated conversations over selective college admission, including a loud cry to end or curtail early application programs, we must consider that greater access to the most selective schools must involve a redistribution of precious resources. A smaller percentage of early admits means less savvy students and families gain a relatively greater chance at admission. It also means a larger commitment to financial aid for needy students, which could ultimately drive tuition costs up or redistribute aid away from middle and upper-middle income families.

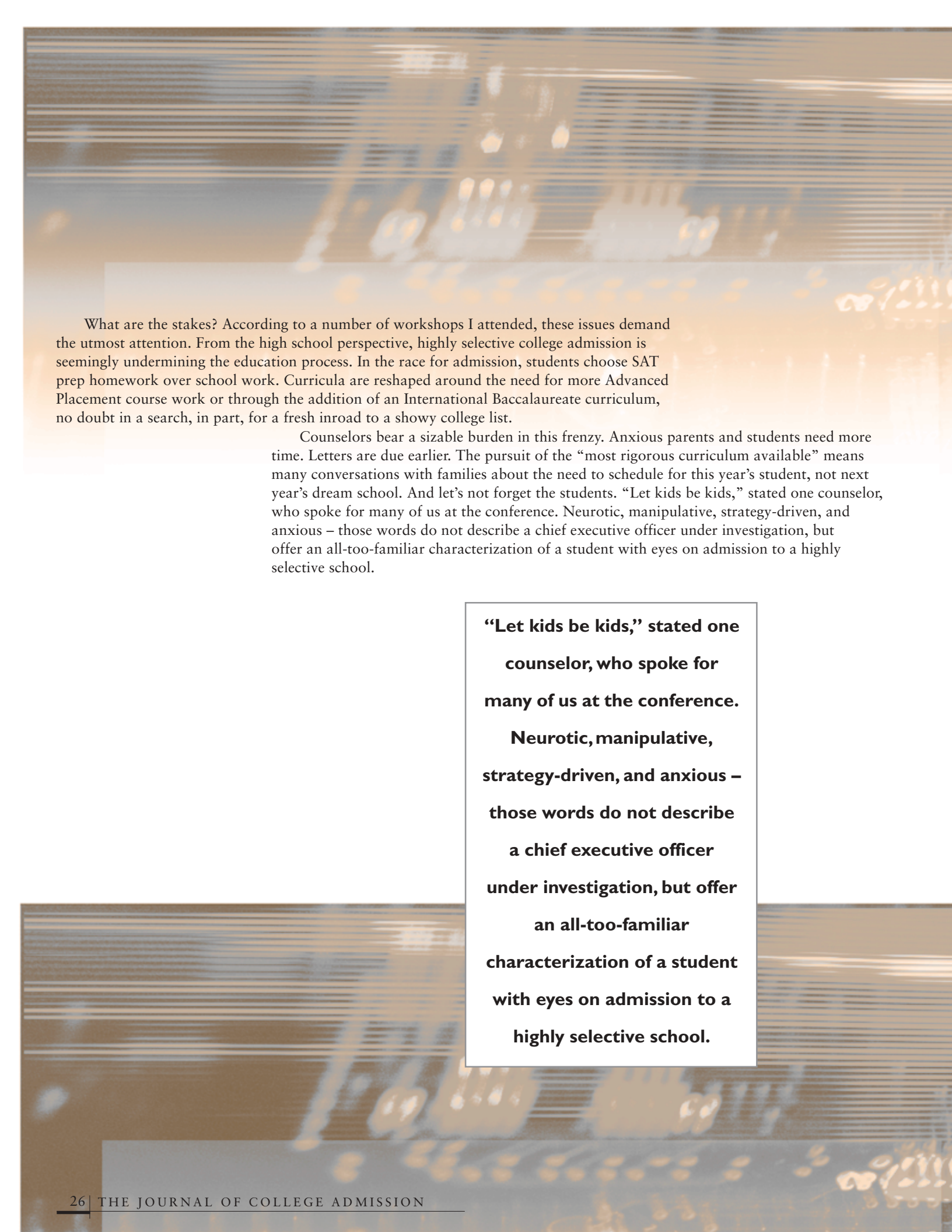
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Basic reform issues related to highly selective college admission will not occur through the creation of more spots for deserving applicants. Rather, any basic changes to the current model will be built on new ways of distributing what every bright and high-achieving student hopes for – admission to those few schools that accept a very small percentage of students while turning away a great many highly-qualified applicants.

I am considering these issues on my return from another NACAC conference along and another round of hand-wringing, angst-ridden complaints and finger pointing about the world of highly selective college admission. The usual suspects surface once again: *U.S. News & World Report* annual rankings, the intense focus on early application programs and the microscopic scrutiny given to senior applicants that virtually eliminates any margin for error. We challenge the media to behave more responsibly. We beg secondary schools and families to behave more reasonably. We urge college admission offices to behave more ethically.

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What are the stakes? According to a number of workshops I attended, these issues demand the utmost attention. From the high school perspective, highly selective college admission is seemingly undermining the education process. In the race for admission, students choose SAT prep homework over school work. Curricula are reshaped around the need for more Advanced Placement course work or through the addition of an International Baccalaureate curriculum, no doubt in a search, in part, for a fresh inroad to a showy college list.

Counselors bear a sizable burden in this frenzy. Anxious parents and students need more time. Letters are due earlier. The pursuit of the “most rigorous curriculum available” means many conversations with families about the need to schedule for this year’s student, not next year’s dream school. And let’s not forget the students. “Let kids be kids,” stated one counselor, who spoke for many of us at the conference. Neurotic, manipulative, strategy-driven, and anxious – those words do not describe a chief executive officer under investigation, but offer an all-too-familiar characterization of a student with eyes on admission to a highly selective school.

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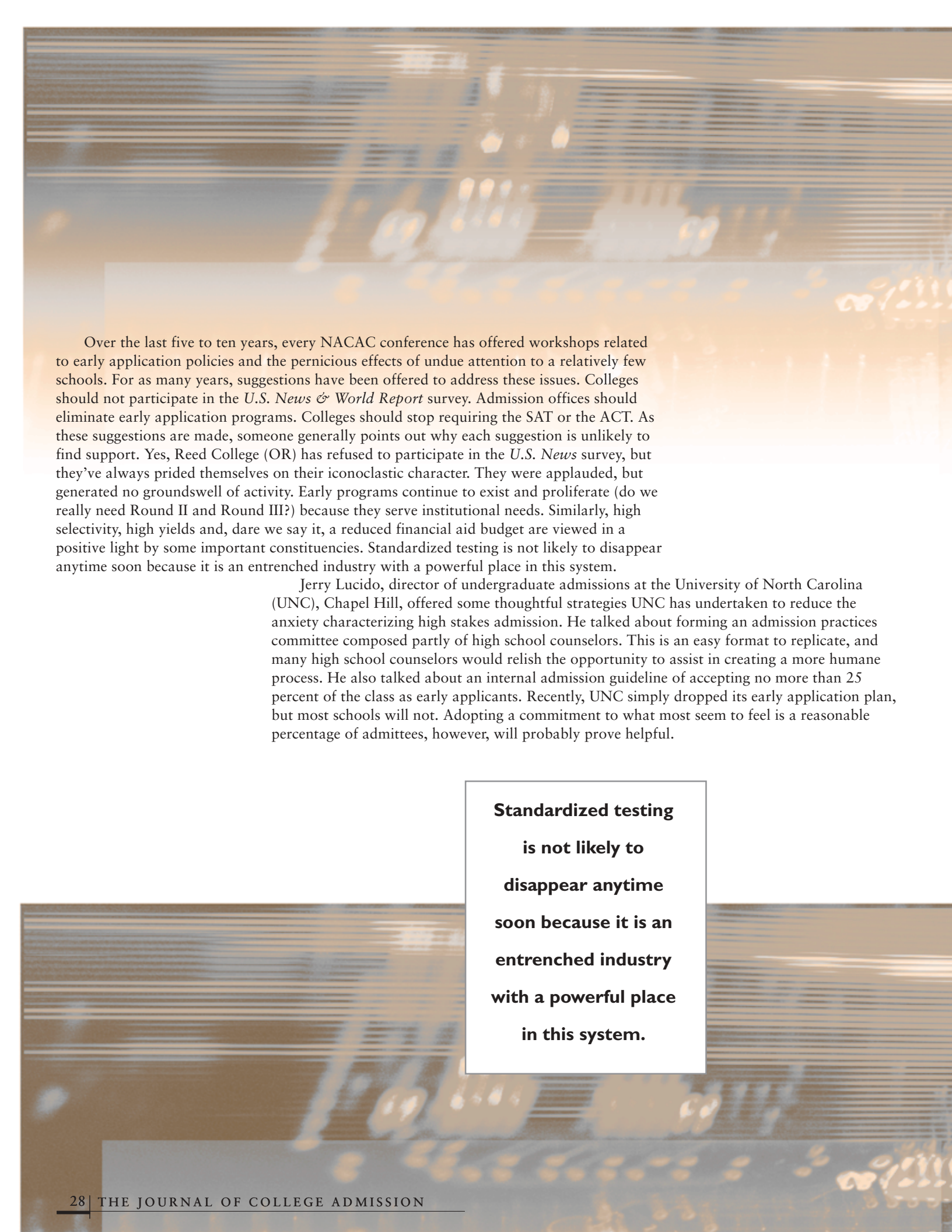
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This listing of what's at stake was already familiar to me and was reinforced this year at the conference. I had not considered two other ramifications of the admission frenzy at the top of the selectivity pyramid, but two sessions broadened my understanding. Theodore O'Neill, dean of admission at University of Chicago (IL), in his session on "Competitive Admission: Good for Education? Good for Democracy?" asserted the system that has evolved to recruit, sort and sift candidates at these few select schools is a challenge to our democratic system because it undermines the meritocratic values we hold so dear. As a nation, we give voice to the sentiment that we are all created equal, but most of us don't quite believe that. We do believe everyone should have an equal chance at the brass ring, be it a promotion, a house in the right neighborhood or admission to the best school. O'Neill's session presented this thesis: the demographically-skewed profile of early decision and early action applicants, in concert with such advantages as private tutors for the SAT, a lifetime of learning opportunities and an insider's knowledge the admission process create a system that is undemocratic at its heart. This system directly affects our democracy because so many future leaders emerge from so few schools.

Thomas Parker, dean of admission at Amherst College (MA), added another dimension to this argument in a session entitled "Early Decision/Early Action: The Good, the Bad and the Unanswerable Questions." He offered data to show early applicants, as a pool, will require less financial aid than regular applicants. As schools admit 40 to 50 percent of the class under an early plan, a little-acknowledged effect is the significant lessening of financial aid monies offered to the incoming class, which contradicts the stated goals of building a more diverse student body as the admission office reaches out to underrepresented populations. In a sense, this argument is a continuation of O'Neill's point. A type of "opportunity backsliding" occurs, but because admission policies seeming to apply equally to all applicants mask it, it is hard to understand, let alone challenge.

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Over the last five to ten years, every NACAC conference has offered workshops related to early application policies and the pernicious effects of undue attention to a relatively few schools. For as many years, suggestions have been offered to address these issues. Colleges should not participate in the *U.S. News & World Report* survey. Admission offices should eliminate early application programs. Colleges should stop requiring the SAT or the ACT. As these suggestions are made, someone generally points out why each suggestion is unlikely to find support. Yes, Reed College (OR) has refused to participate in the *U.S. News* survey, but they've always prided themselves on their iconoclastic character. They were applauded, but generated no groundswell of activity. Early programs continue to exist and proliferate (do we really need Round II and Round III?) because they serve institutional needs. Similarly, high selectivity, high yields and, dare we say it, a reduced financial aid budget are viewed in a positive light by some important constituencies. Standardized testing is not likely to disappear anytime soon because it is an entrenched industry with a powerful place in this system.

Jerry Lucido, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, offered some thoughtful strategies UNC has undertaken to reduce the anxiety characterizing high stakes admission. He talked about forming an admission practices committee composed partly of high school counselors. This is an easy format to replicate, and many high school counselors would relish the opportunity to assist in creating a more humane process. He also talked about an internal admission guideline of accepting no more than 25 percent of the class as early applicants. Recently, UNC simply dropped its early application plan, but most schools will not. Adopting a commitment to what most seem to feel is a reasonable percentage of admittees, however, will probably prove helpful.

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In my experience, I have met few high school counselors who are examining their school's own policies to defuse some of the senior strife. At high schools where anxiety is high, early application plans are inextricably tied to the pressure seniors feel. Is there any school willing to say to their seniors, "Only 25 percent of you can apply under an early plan this year?" Perhaps less dramatic, a school might set up rules for early applicants: seniors must articulate why they have selected their number one choice and must demonstrate they are legitimate candidates for the early pool. Why suggest these tests and restrictions for early candidates? Because these recommendations can help high schools reduce their seniors' anxiety levels.

A great many articles and conversations, and many NACAC conferences punctuating them, inform us all that the college admission processes at the most selective schools can create too great a pressure on students. The 2002 NACAC conference only confirmed what we know. It's time to expend less energy describing the problem and more on solutions. All of us might well begin with the question, "What are we willing to give up?"

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