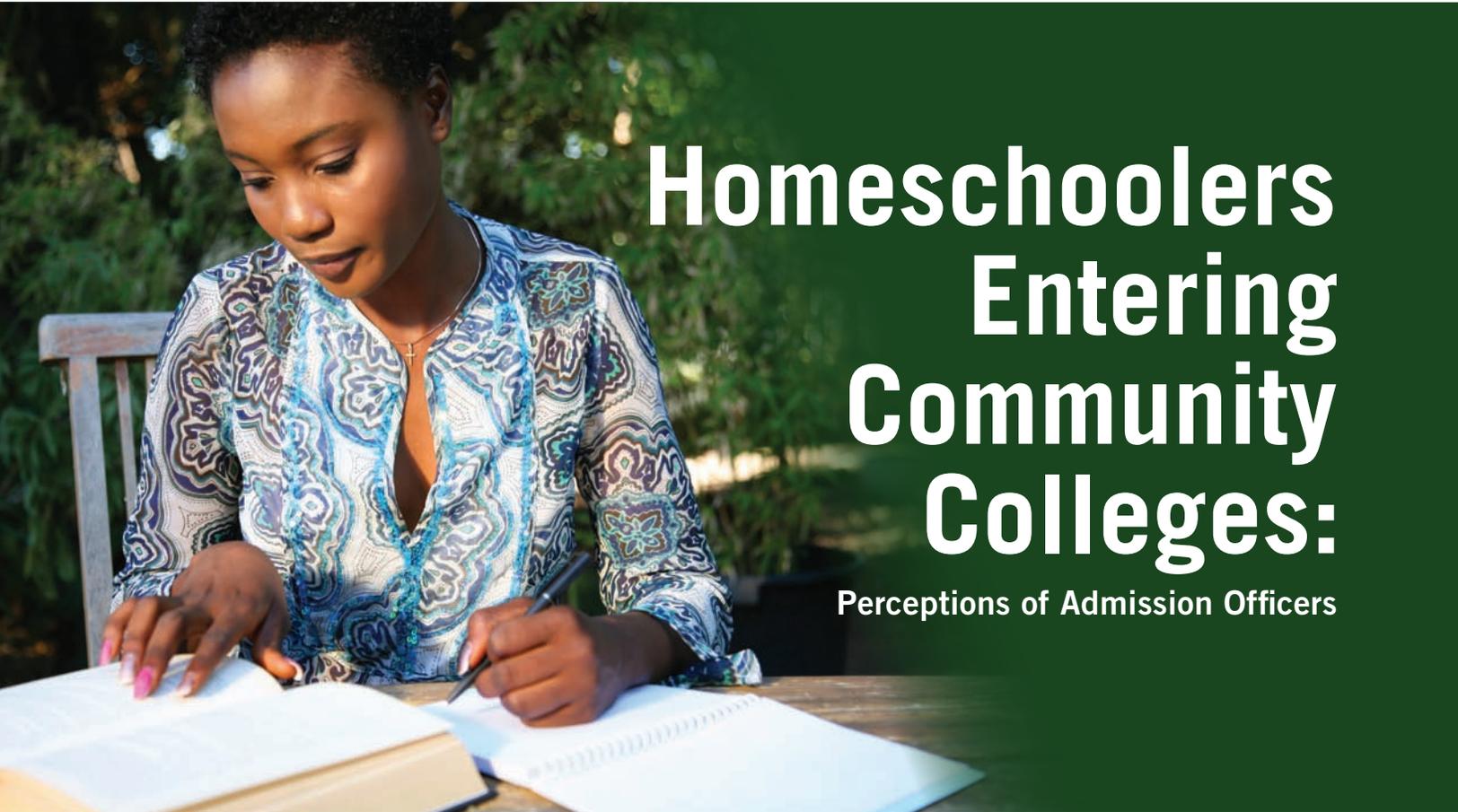


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Homeschoolers Entering Community Colleges:

Perceptions of Admission Officers



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Introduction

An estimated 1.1 million students were homeschooled in the United States in spring 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2006). This figure represents a sizeable increase from the homeschooling rate of 1.7 percent—or 850,000 students—in 1999 (Bielick, Chandler, and Broughman, 2001). With the popularity of homeschooling strengthening, particularly homeschooling at the secondary level, the prevalence of homeschoolers attempting to enter higher education is escalating. Despite this trend, many college admission officers across the U.S. seem unprepared in evaluating these candidates for admission (Callaway, 2004; Jones and Gloeckner, 2004a).

Many college and university admission offices struggle with how to fairly and accurately assess homeschooled applicants seeking admission given that these students typically lack a high school diploma or regionally accredited academic transcript for presentation to admission offices for evaluation. Often, college officials cannot fairly scrutinize a homeschooler's preparation given the varying regulatory practices and guidelines among the states (Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers [AACRAO], 1999). In lieu of the typical credentialing documents, some higher education institutions require scores from assessments such as the General Equivalency Diploma or the SAT-II in addition to other required standardization scores (AACRAO, 1999). Some homeschool advocates, however, regard admission practices and policies such as this as unfair and unnecessary.

Recognizing the obstacles that many homeschoolers face when applying to colleges and universities in the U.S., homeschooling advocates proposed an amendment of the Higher Education Act that would have prohibited colleges and universities from requiring alternative admission requirements. Although the amendment was dropped, institutions were cautioned from adopting or maintaining admission policies that unnecessarily discriminated against applicants from non-public, non-traditional settings—namely students who had been homeschooled (AACRAO, 1999). In 1998, the Home School Legal Defense was successful in its efforts to amend the Higher Education Act (Pub. L. No. 105-244). As a result, colleges and universities that receive federal funds are prohibited from requiring that a homeschooled student applying for federal financial aid take a GED or an ability to benefit (ATB) test—as long as the student can demonstrate successful completion of a secondary education in a homeschool setting, has met state law requirements, and has been admitted to the college or university (Home School Legal Defense Association, 2006).

Thus, while the amendment affords protection to homeschooled students seeking federal financial aid

assistance, it does not provide protection to homeschooled students seeking admission to a higher education institution—a necessary prerequisite for federal aid eligibility. Financial aid offices have been given ample guidance for the awarding of federal financial aid to students who have been homeschooled, but admission officers serving U.S. colleges and universities have been given little or no guidance on what criteria they should use to evaluate the applications of students who have been homeschooled. The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate Committee reports that accompanied the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (Pub. L. No. 105-244) recommended that higher education institutions discontinue admission policies that require homeschooled students to take additional tests beyond what is required of students who have graduated from accredited secondary schools (Home School Legal Defense Association, 2006). Specifically, this report encouraged colleges and universities to discontinue the requirement of SAT II scores or the GED for homeschooled students, but also encouraged colleges and universities to consider ACT or SAT scores—the more traditional assessments used by four-year colleges and universities to evaluate candidates for admission. This report suggested that requiring homeschooled students to take tests beyond what is expected of a student who graduated from an accredited high school could be viewed as discriminatory.

This may place community colleges in a delicate situation given that some four-year colleges and universities recommend that students seeking admission to their institutions first attend a community college. By virtue of their mission, community colleges admit students who may not otherwise be granted admission to a baccalaureate-granting institution. When homeschooled students apply seeking academic experience, community college administrators are often ill-equipped in identifying and responding to these applicants. Since the majority of community colleges do not require ACT or SAT scores from their applicants, many community college administrators are left pondering how to determine a ho-

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meschooled student's eligibility for admission—particularly those students who are under the age of 18 and not eligible for ATB entrance.

Compounding this problem, little research has been conducted regarding homeschoolers and community colleges. To help narrow this gap, the researchers surveyed all community college admission officers in a mid-Atlantic state to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent do community colleges have formal policies relating to the admission of students who are or have been homeschooled?
- 2) What are the perceptions of community college admission officers regarding homeschooled students?
- 3) To what extent do colleges offer special programs or services to homeschooled students and their parents prior to or at entry to the college?

This study seeks to add knowledge about a growing student population in higher education institutions. Overtime, homeschoolers will gain greater ground in higher education institutions, and institutions that adapt their policies, programs and services to incorporate the needs of homeschoolers will be best prepared for their arrival.

Empirical Findings

Empirical research on homeschoolers and their experiences at a college or university is scarce. Whereas plentiful literature exists, it is often based on anecdotal reports. Although

useful, anecdotal reports often lead to more skepticism. The following empirical research provides a general overview of the collegiate performance of homeschoolers and highlights the perceptions of college and university staff members now serving this growing population.

Collegiate Performance

Jenkins (1998) examined the performance of homeschooled students at community colleges in Texas by evaluating the college transcripts of 101 homeschooled students and comparing their mean grade point averages (GPAs) with the mean GPAs of students who had graduated from a traditional high school. Through an independent-samples t test, she found that full- and part-time homeschooled students had a significantly higher mean GPA than the traditional high school graduates.

While this study was the only one found to address collegiate performance of homeschoolers at the community college level, multiple studies of students at higher education institutions across the country did not find any significant differences between homeschooled and traditional high-school graduates in terms of academic performance through GPA, SAT scores, English grades, etc. (Barno, 2004; Gray, 1998; Jones and Gloeckner, 2004b). Given these findings, it is likely that few, if any, significant differences exist between the academic performance of homeschool graduates and traditional high school graduates.

Perceptions of College Personnel Regarding Homeschoolers

Perceptions college personnel, particularly admission officers, have of homeschoolers may impact their ability to fairly assess a homeschooled applicant's potential for admission and could subsequently impact a homeschooler's initial perceptions of the college. In a study of 210 four-year universities, Barnebey (1986) found that 96 percent of the admission officers reported that their jobs were more difficult when the applicants were unable to submit high school transcripts for evaluative purposes. Further, while approximately 83 percent accepted the GED as substitute for a high school transcript, roughly 57 percent did not believe the GED served as an adequate substitute.

Seventy-three percent of the admission officers at schools that did not accept homeschoolers indicated they would encourage homeschooled applicants to attend a junior or community college prior to seeking admission at their institutions. There was a statistically significant difference between admission officers at non-accepting and accepting universities concerning the expected success of homeschooled applicants.

Whereas admission officers at universities that admitted homeschoolers expected homeschoolers to be as successful as other students, admission officers of non-accepting institutions expected homeschoolers to be less successful.

In a more recent study, Jenkins (1998) found that approximately 63 percent of the community college admission officers expected homeschoolers to be equally or more successful as students admitted from accredited high schools. As with Barnebey (1986), Jenkins also found that more than half of the respondents (54 percent) indicated that the lack of transcripts made their job more difficult. Thirty-six percent indicated that it did not make it more difficult.

In another study comparing homeschooled students to their general student population in terms of their academic success and social adjustment, only 31 percent of admission officers saw homeschoolers as either “far more” or “more” academically successful (Ray, 2004b). Thirty-eight percent viewed homeschooled students as academically about average and 44 percent either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “The majority of homeschooled students are at least as socially well adjusted as are public schooled students.”

Jones and Gloeckner (2004a) assessed admission personnel’s perceptions of homeschoolers and received mixed results. Whereas 78 percent of admission officers expected homeschool graduates to be as successful or even more successful in comparison with traditional high school graduates, only 44 percent expected homeschool graduates to cope as well as traditional high school graduates. Almost 75 percent of the responding colleges and universities had an official homeschool admission policy. This finding differs from that of Jenkins (1998), who found that only 47 percent of the community colleges surveyed had an official home school admission policy, and Barnebey (1986), who found that only about 10 percent of the schools had an official policy.

Method

Subjects

One admission officer from each community college admission office located in a mid-Atlantic state was identified for participation. Of the 23 officers invited to participate, 12 responses were received—a 52 percent return rate.

Data Collection and Instruments

A modified version of Jenkins’ (1998) and Jones and Gloeckner’s (2004) instruments was developed in an electronic format. The first part of the survey contained open-ended questions asking respondents to describe their admission policies

and procedures for homeschooled applicants including the means by which they communicated the policies and procedures to students. The second part of the survey examined the perceptions that admission officers had of homeschooled applicants using a Likert scale.

Data Analysis

The survey instrument contained categorical scales and Likert scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Descriptive statistics were used through SPSS in order to analyze the data. Some open-ended questions were also offered, and analyses were made through examining common responses.

Findings

Policies and Procedures for Admission of Homeschooled Graduates

Admission officers were asked whether their college had an official policy regarding the regular admission of homeschooled graduates. Of those who responded, half reported having an official policy, and half did not. Those with an official policy stated they used multiple means to communicate it (see Table 1).

Table 1. Means of Publicizing Policy on Admission of Homeschooled Graduates

Method	n	Percent
College Catalog	5	100
Student Handbook	1	20.0
College Web page	3	60.0

In lieu of transcripts from an accredited high school, community college admission officers were asked what documents they would accept to evaluate the application of a homeschooled graduate. Various credential tools were utilized ranging from standardized tests to a letter of recommendation. Most of the 12 respondents indicated more than one document that could be used to satisfy the admission requirement (see Table 2).

Responses varied when officers described their college’s official policy regarding the regular admission of homeschooled students. Some denoted that a self-made high school transcript or diploma was acceptable. Others noted their college’s acceptance of transcripts created from a third party, GED results, and/or SAT scores. A few officers noted that a copy of the homeschool agreement was sufficient for admission.

Table 2. Documents Accepted/Required from Homeschooled Graduates for Admission Decisions

Method	n	Percent
ACT Scores	6	50.0
SAT Scores	7	58.3
Essay	0	0.0
Letter of Recommendation	1	8.3
GED	7	58.3
Other ¹	4	33.3

¹Four admission officers responded that they accepted their college's placement test scores to evaluate a homeschooled graduate's application for admission.

Sixty percent reported having procedures in place for responding to homeschooled graduates seeking admission to their college. Procedures varied for responding to these students and were similar to those received when prompted to describe their college's policy. However, many colleges required these students to meet with their dean of student services and/or an admission officer prior to gaining acceptance.

Policies and Procedures of Homeschooled Applicants Seeking Provisional Admission

Seventy percent of admission officers indicated that they did not have an official policy regarding the admission of students currently being homeschooled seeking special or provisional admission to enroll in college classes. Those with policies publicized them through various means, as provided in Table 3. The policies for admitting homeschooled students seeking provisional or special admission varied. One college considered any student meeting the minimum age requirement of 15 for admission as long as the student provided a copy of the authorization to be homeschooled, while another did not specify a minimum age requirement. Another admission officer stated in addition to needing the authorization to be homeschooled, any candidate for admission who was under the age of 16 was required to meet with the dean of student services.

Eighty percent of respondents did have procedures in place for responding to a student who is being homeschooled and seeking special/provisional admission. Responses varied when admission officers described their procedures. While a few responded that their procedures mirrored their policies, 20 percent required a transcript with one college requiring submission of GED scores in addition to the transcript. Thirty percent required proof of the student being in an authorized

Table 3. Means of Publicizing Policy on Admission of Current Homeschooled Students Seeking Enrollment at the College

Method	n	Percent
College Catalog	2	66.6
Student Handbook	0	0.0
College Web page	3	100.0
Other ¹	1	33.3

¹Semester schedule was the mode identified.

homeschooling program. Requiring students to meet with an admission officer and/or dean of students was also a common response.

Perceptions of Admission Officers Towards Homeschooled Students

Admission officers were asked questions concerning their attitudes towards homeschooled students. All respondents either strongly agreed (45 percent) or agreed (55 percent) that they expected homeschooled graduates to be as successful academically as students who had graduated from an accredited high school.

Furthermore, respondents had similar views of homeschooled graduates' academic and social preparedness for college. Sixty-four percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that homeschooled applicants 18 years of age or older were academically prepared for college while 55 percent strongly agreed or agreed that homeschooled applicants 18 years of age or older were socially prepared for college. According to one admission officer, "Homeschooled students are as prepared or even better prepared for college academics as their high school graduate counterparts. Occasionally, socialization might be a concern but not very often." Continuing along this line, another officer stated, "The biggest deficiency I have seen when we hire homeschooled graduates as work study students is lack of social preparedness. Most are extremely shy, don't participate in outside clubs and find some things shocking."

Responses differed regarding the academic and social preparedness of homeschooled applicants under the age of 18: Thirty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed that these younger homeschoolers were academically prepared, and only 27 percent agreed that they were socially prepared for college.

Many admission officers (46 percent) agreed that the lack of a transcript from an accredited high school for home-

schooled students made their jobs more difficult. Eighty-two percent either agreed or strongly agreed that they expected to see an increase in the number of applicants who have been homeschooled. Finally, 63 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that their colleges were adequately prepared to work with homeschool applications.

Special Programs and Services for Homeschooled Students and their Parents

The majority (73 percent) of the officers' colleges did not provide special programs, workshops, or services for homeschooled applicants and/or their parents. Several respondents commented on the special needs of homeschoolers, with one suggesting, "Although we treat the homeschooled students like concurrent students, we recognize that they need help navigating the college process." When colleges did provide special services, those services ranged from orientations for homeschooled students, having a counselor work one-on-one with homeschooled applicants and their parents to having students under age 17 meet with the college's dean of student services prior to the start of classes.

What is the environment in your admission office? Homeschooled applicants may not be comfortable with the institutional approach found in many community colleges. What seems normal to those of us who work in higher education—from an application for admission to financial aid and placement tests—may be a foreign language to a homeschooled applicant.

Discussion

Although the exact number of those being homeschooled is unknown, a few facts are certain: this number is steadily increasing, these students are going to college and, in many instances, they are going to community colleges. When homeschoolers apply to a community college, their welcomes vary from institution to institution. While one college may have a formal admission policy in place for homeschooled students, another may not. These formal policies often vary

depending on the category of homeschooled student, and the procedures themselves vary widely.

Although it is simple to suggest homeschooled applicants should be required to complete the same admission procedures as their non-homeschooled counterparts, in reality this may not be a simple process. Homeschoolers are different in that they may have different documentation or possibly no documents to submit for evaluative purposes. While a lot can be said for the flexibility of the community college admission process, improvements can still be made to assist both the homeschooler and admission personnel.

Community colleges are often referred to as open-door institutions, yet homeschooled students may encounter several obstacles upon application to a community college. Ray (2004a) suggests that our unknown biases and prejudices may be affecting our view of the homeschooler's education despite literature describing them as highly motivated and with a strong sense of self-discipline (Sutton, 2002) and research findings that homeschoolers perform as well academically if not better than their traditionally-schooled counterparts (Jenkins, 1998). In this instance, however, community college admission officers were not showing bias against the homeschooler as all admission personnel surveyed perceived homeschooled applicants as successful academically as those schooled in a more traditional setting. If anything, community college admission officers are extremely aware of the performance of homeschoolers on their campuses. Perhaps the issue is not knowing exactly how to handle the traditional-aged student with a less-than-traditional background seeking admission.

Since the number of homeschool applicants is increasing, community colleges need to develop and publicize formal admission guidelines for this population. These guidelines should be flexible, fair, reasonable and based on research and address the needs of local homeschoolers (Ray, 2004b). These policies need to be publicized and posted clearly on college Web sites, where many homeschoolers do their research, as well as in course catalogs and college brochures.

The National Center for Home Education (2006) suggests that while homeschoolers should produce a transcript demonstrating completion of high school, colleges should have flexible guidelines for these records. The center also suggests that colleges provide homeschool applicants with a credit evaluation form to be completed in lieu of a high school transcript. While this would assist homeschoolers and parents of homeschoolers in better understanding the community college's policies, such a transcript evaluation would also serve to educate community college personnel

in what homeschooling in their locale entails, both in the variety of approaches to homeschooling as well as in the coursework completed.

What is the environment in your admission office? Homeschooled applicants may not be comfortable with the institutional approach found in many community colleges. What seems normal to those of us who work in higher education—from an application for admission to financial aid and placement tests—may be a foreign language to a homeschooled applicant. While the respondents in this study perceived that homeschooled students were just as academically prepared as other students, they were not as unanimous in their view of the applicant's social preparation. Whether this is fact or myth is left for further research, but training personnel in how to best address the needs of this growing population is vital. Hicks and Shere (2006) refer to this as reflective admission work.

Community colleges recruit in both public high schools and private schools, yet the homeschooled population is largely untapped. Open houses for homeschooled students and their parents could recruit students and help educate both groups in the admission process. Current students who have been homeschooled could assist in the planning and helping staff the open house. Financial aid and a variety of other college support services could be discussed.

Supporting students does not end once they are accepted and have enrolled in their first class. Community colleges provide orientation for students in general, but how well do these orientations serve the homeschooled student who may have specific needs not addressed in traditional orientations? More research exploring their needs could benefit both the students as well as the institution. In this study, only 27 percent of the responding admission personnel reported that their colleges provided special programs, workshops, or services for homeschooled students.

Homeschooling is continuing to grow, and homeschoolers are enrolling in community colleges in increasing numbers. Predictions suggest that the United States will have almost 3 million homeschooled students by 2010 (Ray, 2004a). While many of these homeschoolers will choose to attend four-year institutions, many will also choose community colleges. Admission personnel need to be ready to meet the challenges provided by this population, making sure that their institutions are truly open door for all applicants.

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