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Application Inflation in College Admissions

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engaged in a vicious cycle. As the number of applications soars, colleges struggle to accurately predict yield (that is the number of accepted students who actually enroll). Yield is critical to the college's bottom-line. As colleges struggle with yield, they resort to longer wait lists and other enrollment management tactics. On the other side, students hedge against increasing competition and declining admit rates by flooding the system with more applications than ever before. This phenomenon is occurring nationwide as more students cast a broader geographic net.

Since larger applicant pools do not necessarily improve the quality of incoming freshman classes, many higher education experts are lamenting that colleges are simply rejecting more highly capable students because they have so many to choose from. The number of "all-stars" in the country has not changed-they are just jumping into more applicant pools. Undergraduate admission offices across the country are staggering under the increase in the numbers of applications, and their evaluation processes and staffing are not structured to handle the volume.

Despite this struggle, colleges continue to employ a variety of recruitment strategies to attract even more applicants. In the early 1990's colleges purchased 35 million student names and addresses from CollegeBoard. In 2009 that number rose to over 80 million. And Fast Track Applications are increasingly common (with fee waived and pre-filled to boot!). Why are colleges actively participating in application inflation? Some of the reasons include: increase in applications is linked to perceptions of popularity, selectivity and quality. Greater application volume also slightly improves U.S. News and World Report's ranking (but every little bit counts!), please

Recently I overheard a conversation between two high school students at a local coffee shop. One student told his friend "My grades aren't great and my SAT scores are mediocre, so my plan is to take full advantage of the Common Application and apply to about 20 or 30 schools just to see what happens. My mom and dad can afford it, so it won't be a problem." Then he asked his friend, "What do you think of my strategy?"

He didn't ask for my opinion so I thought I would address his question in this article. Picking which schools to apply to is an important part of the college admission process. So while it may look appealing to "play the odds" and just try to get in somewhere, you may be robbing yourself of both a rewarding education and future opportunities. Even if your grades have suffered and your test scores are not the greatest, you can still assemble a list of colleges that would best meet your needs. In fact, finding a list of appropriate schools is even more important for students whose grades and boards are less than stellar. These students generally benefit greatly from a supportive educational environment that matches well with their interests and needs. If you haven't been able to do your best work in high school, your college years present an opportunity to start fresh and take advantage of new opportunities. You are cheating yourself out of this chance by making your No. 1 criterion the ease with which you can hit the send button.

Another factor that this student may not have considered is how important it is for colleges to know the applicant has given careful consideration to their institution before applying. Demonstrated interest is important because when colleges accept an applicant they want that student to enroll. You actually reduce your chances of acceptance at a college if they have not heard from you until your application arrives or if your responses to their supplement show you have not researched their school with care. If a decision comes down to a number of applicants with similar academic and extracurricular profiles, the college will choose the applicant who has demonstrated interest. The Common Application requires one personal essay and one short response, but most colleges that use this application also add supplemental essays to distinguish applicants who have a sincere interest in their school from those who are applying "just to see what happens."

Today, both applicants to college and colleges themselves are engaged in a vicious cycle. As the number of applications soars, colleges struggle to accurately predict yield (that is the number of accepted students who actually enroll). Yield is critical to the college's bottom-line. As colleges struggle with yield, they resort to longer wait lists and other enrollment management tactics. On the other side, students hedge against increasing competition and declining admit rates by flooding the system with more applications than ever before. This phenomenon is occurring nationwide as more students cast a broader geographic net.

alumni, aids in fund-raising and helps to attract top professors and researchers. Even bond rating agencies use the number of applications a college receives as one measure of demand, and thus as an indicator of the institution's financial health.

There are many voices that question the ethics of intense recruitment strategies by colleges that wind up rejecting the overwhelming majority of applicants. And some colleges simply refuse to take the bait. Charles Deacon, the dean of undergraduate admissions at Georgetown University, says his university has no plans to join the Common Application. "...this is a personal relationship between a student and college. We know people are applying who (really) want to apply. No college should appeal to everyone."

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