Is College Admission Too Competitive?

*By **Dr. Amanda N. Gibson, DBA***

Prospective students and parents, college administrators with their stakeholders, and policy-makers discuss the issue of college admission fervently across the board - and each of these sides brings a different point of view. Students hope to gain access to a high-ranking college; colleges aim to fill their classes – and increase their profit from year to year. It would be interesting to analyze what is behind the dreaded college admission, in the short and long run.

1. Is it the truth?

In a recent report, dated January 31 2013, the staff at Peterson's estimates that the number of high school graduates will rise by 10 percent in the next few years. This translates into thousands additional applicants facing the college admission process – and increased competition for entrance in high-ranking colleges. Dr. James Renick, senior vice-president for programs and research in the American Council on Education (ACE) stated, "rankings tend to be skewed toward a resource-heavy model" (Gardner, 2007). Also known as the Ivy League schools, Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Penn, Dartmouth and Columbia have long tradition, high costs for attendance but also a long line of applicants for the prestige associated to their names. Ranking for these big heavies is easy to maintain, as they get points for the number of rejections (both Harvard and MIT had this year the highest percentage rejected in history) but also for retention rates. About retention, more later.

So back to the question: is it true that college admission is too competitive? The answer is, depends on college. It's more and more difficult to gain admission to an Ivy

League school. But there are also open admission institutions, fighting amongst them to fill their classes. Which brings us to the second question:

2. Is it fair to all concerned?

A 2008 snapshot of the number of high-school graduates found it related to demographics, as baby boomers' children reached college age. Washington and Lee University in Virginia had 4,000 applications for 455 seats, Colorado College was expecting 5,000 applications for 500 seats, Ball State in Indiana got 13,000 applications for 3,100 spaces. Such wealth of candidates forced admission boards to reject a great many deserving candidates, making it into a really competitive process. For better or for worse in time the demographic issue is rebalancing, by 2015 the candidates numbers starting to decrease - good news for high-schoolers, bad news for colleges' bottom line.

The admission process has been scrutinized, analyzed, and criticized. Ample discussions brought to attention the affirmative action, the SAT tests, selective admission, and early decision – to name just a few. Interestingly enough, though, is that media attention focuses mostly on a small number of students, from hyper-selective institutions (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2009). We should not forget the second (and third)-tier colleges, with open admission and lower costs. Why are they less sought-after? Because students enrolled there have lower percentage of graduates, due either to dropouts or transfers. As such organizations are funded partly by public resources, it begs the question if minimal admission standards represent a good use of said resources. Shouldn't the focus be shifted from student access to student success?

3. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

"In education, reform tends to follow cycles, often bouncing from one extreme to another without considering the possibility of incorporating multiple perspectives simultaneously" (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). It is just as good motto as any for a discussion about college admission only, neglecting completion and further usefulness. This can be better illustrated, maybe, looking at minorities' access to colleges: following efforts to grant access to equal education, by 1975-76 African-American and Latino high-school graduates had the same chance of attending a college as White classmates (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). By 1980 though it became evident that in spite of the help to get into colleges, these populations often would not graduate. Searching for explanations, researchers discovered that completion rates were higher in competitive colleges than in open-access ones. Competitive colleges had a clear pathway and peer-group support, forming a completion strategy lacking in second-tier schools. University of Oregon, in 2009, preparing to toughen the admission standards, expected a boost in racial diversity. Moving form 70 percent to 50 percent automatic admissions, the University officials were expecting to fill the difference with students possessing outstanding attributes, capable of enriching the University community (Anonymous, 2009).

From minorities to a nation – admission to Jordanian Public Universities used to be open to almost 100% of the high-school graduates. Massadeh (2012) found that such policy is negatively affecting the country's economic and social conditions. Massadeh (2012) also proposed elevating the standards of curriculum and an elite selection of students, in order to be able to eradicate the graduate unemployment rates and be able to compete regionally and internationally.

4. Discussion

Hopefully the question of college admission being too competitive has been answered: There is agreement that for high ranked colleges the competition is high, the costs are high (bad) and the completion rate is also high (good!). There are also numerous lower-ranked colleges with open access, lower tuition costs but a lower graduation percentage. It is time, maybe, to take things one step further, and see what happens after graduation.

According to Henderson (2012), an analysis by Wall Street Journal found that only 55 percent of class of 2011 law school grads were employed full time. Almost half of the graduates were un- or under-employed, while 85 percent of law school grads shoulder a staggering amount of student debt: $98,500 on average. The same report finds only 8 percent of 2011 grads working in big firms - for big salaries. For the rest the repayment of student loans will soon extinguish the graduation euphoria.

It may be a single example, but I think it frames nicely the question – is college admission and its competitiveness really the biggest problem we face? What sorts of students gain admission? Of what quality is the education they receive? At what cost? And most important, what is their employability, their perspectives after graduating? As high school student I can only hope somebody, in the not-so-far future, will not only ask these questions but maybe also find some answers …

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