Metrics that Matter

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While the success of college and university admissions teams is often judged by a few key metrics that drive institutional rankings, the metrics that are measured—and the reasons they're prioritized—do not jive with the realities of today's students or the application process.

Every year around this time I get phone calls and email requests asking for our application numbers and how they compare to the year before. Journalists, college guides and even banks and ratings agencies want to know how many applications we received this year, as if that was far and above the most important measure of institutional health.

I always struggle with whether or not to engage in these discussions because, while I recognize the obvious importance of applications numbers, I also have to recognize that they are meaningless without some context or qualifiers.

Take for example our application numbers two years ago. They were down 20 percent from the prior year and yet they resulted in more actual enrollments—and our most successful admissions cycle—in seven years! What the journalists did not want to know or understand was that we had added two essay questions, making our application more rigorous that year. They also did not care that we increased our yield from admit to enrollment from 19 percent to 27 percent. By asking for more essays we increased the self-selection within our application pool—students who were not motivated enough to do the extra work we asked for just self-selected out by not applying. And while it worked, and we enrolled our largest class of highly motivated, good-fit students in the last seven years, the journalists simply noted that we were down in applications.

Selectivity is another admissions stat that is misused on a regular basis. Selectivity refers to a college's admit rate or the percentage of applicants that are admitted. Selectivity is a major driver in both US News rankings and in general desirability. Students and parents feel special when they are admitted to a highly selective school and trends suggest they are willing to pay more for a highly selective school. And for those reasons it might be the most manipulated metric that colleges report. When colleges recognize that lowering their admit rate by 10 points could increase their US News ranking by 5 to 20 spots, they have options to make that happen. Most commonly, they will resort to something known as a "fast-app" to increase the size of their applicant pool. The fast-app is presented to the student as a free to submit web-based application (the colleges pay for it) that comes from the college to the student via email and is pre-filled out for the student. All they need to do is click a few boxes and voila—they have applied! At little or no cost to the student in terms of time or money, these often result in a giant pile of very "soft" applications. When you hear of a college that increased their applications by 10 percent or more in one year, you can bet that there was a fast-app involved. To me, the most damaging part of the fast-app approach is that is undermines the college search process. College search should involve a substantive investigation and then reflection upon the degree to which the student and the college are a good match for each other. Most people would agree that selecting where to go and what to study in college is a decision of major significance in one's life. The application process should help facilitate a

constructive and educational experience that allows both the student and the college to make the most informed decision possible.

This is not to say that colleges should not seek to improve their selectivity within reason. Selectivity should also be understood as the degree to which the college can exercise control over the shaping of their incoming class. In order to serve students adequately and use the resources of the college effectively it is sometimes important to control the numbers of students that will be seeking studio space or lab space or entry into a specialized program that must cap the size of its cohorts each year. In order to distribute students effectively in order to meet their needs and goals, a college should rightly seek an applicant pool large enough to allow them to exert a reasonable ability to "shape" the incoming class.

To me, the most underappreciated metric in admissions is yield: the percentage of the students admitted who actually enroll. I love this metric because it tells me how engaging and therefore constructive our admissions process is. It tells us whether or not we are spinning our wheels with a high volume of applicants who know or care little for our unique institution or if we are successfully building what I call a robust applicant pool. It tells us if our messaging and marketing are effective, authentic, and resonating with the prospective students we are engaging with. When yield is on the decline so is the strength of your admission operation and brand identity. You might mask it for a few years with fast-app-like tactics but low yield will catch up with any institution eventually. It results in incoming classes of minimally invested and committed students who may or may not know what they have signed on for. It also creates a vicious cycle of seeking more and more applications every year to fill the same number of seats. Colleges can and have found themselves spending more and more money paying outside vendors for gimmicks and tricks to increase their (soft) application numbers as they watch their yields decline. In truth, I would take improved yield over improved selectivity every time, and yet outside of my colleagues at Hampshire College, no one ever asks me about our yield.

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