

**It's A Business Model:
Why College Admissions
Decisions
Are So Hard To Predict**

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In Preface...

- **There are no villains.**
- **Everyone is doing the best they can.**
- **But it is time for a re-think.**
- **We can lead.**

Number of U.S. Colleges

- 1845 private 4 yr colleges/596+ 2 yrs
- 629 public 4 yr colleges/1070+ 2 yrs
- 2474 total 4 yr colleges
- 4140 total 4yr + 2yr colleges
- Plus MOOCs and for-profit schools

Private vs Public Universities

- **Have different funding models**
- **Have different mandates**
- **Have different admissions policies and procedures**

Public Universities

- **Funded by state taxpayers**
- **Policies are created or overseen by state legislatures/governor**
- **Admissions policies are (mostly)transparent**
- **Bound by laws**

Private Universities

- **Funding sources are diverse, gov't and private**
- **Each school has a different mandate/mission**
- **Admissions policies are arcane**

How Private Colleges Admit

- **Cases read/scored/summarized at least 2x**
- **Some cases triaged out at first read**
- **Committee discussion/decision with all documents present**
- **Institutional needs addressed**
- **School check**

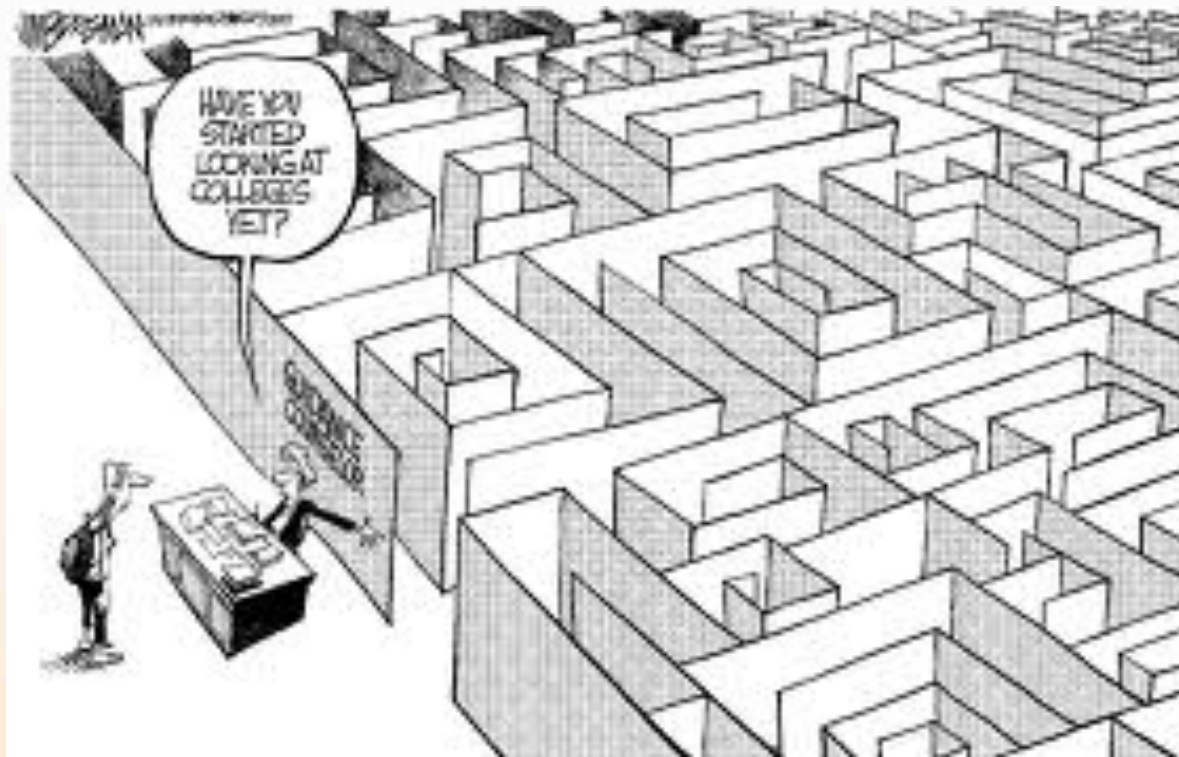
Who Admits? (in order of importance...)

- Admissions counselors (new graduates)
- Assistant Directors (junior staff)
- Associate Directors (senior staff)
- Dean/Director
- Faculty/staff

Facts About College Selectivity

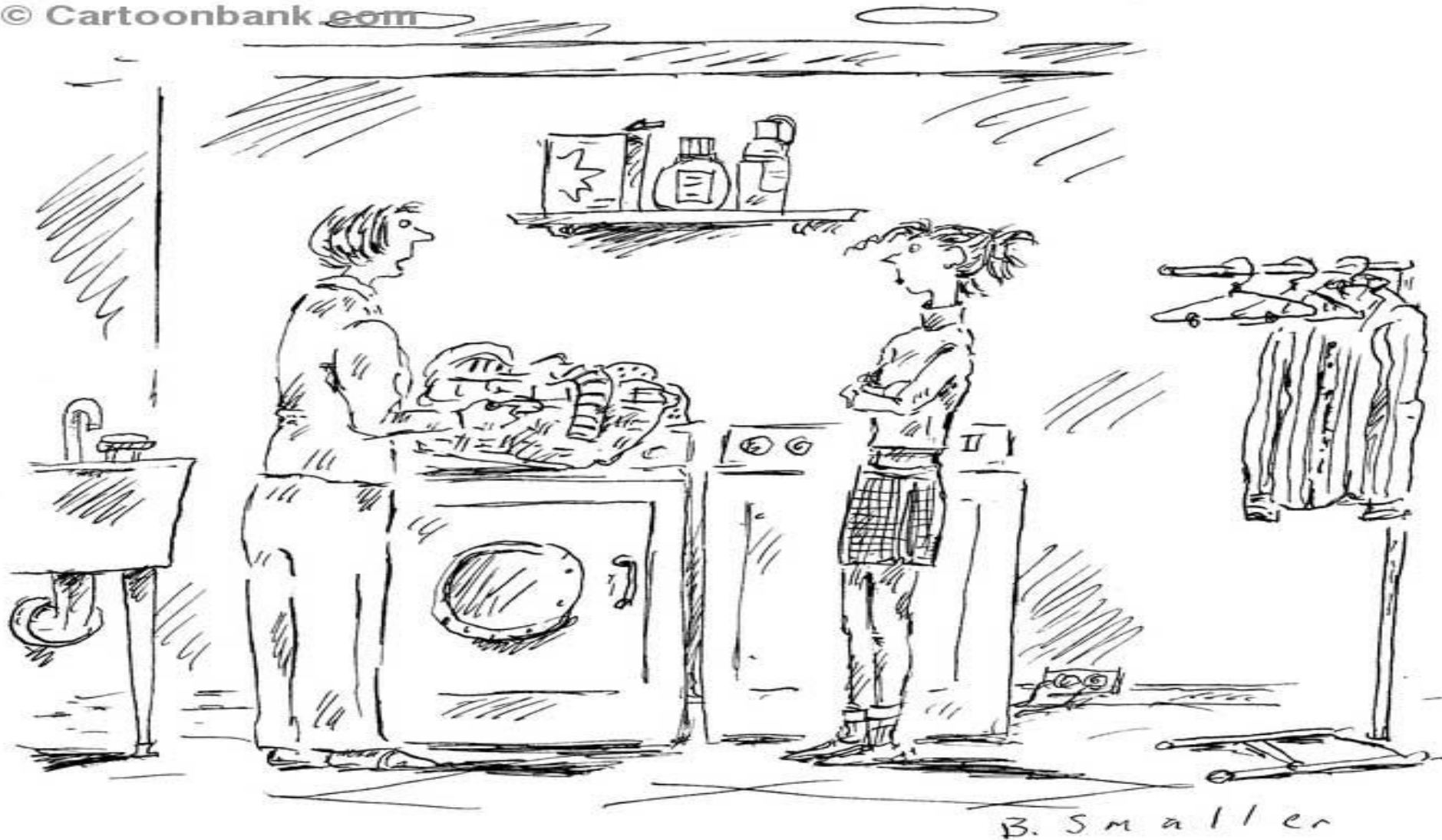
- **4%** of four yr colleges (100) are considered to be “**selective**”: admit rate < 50%, yield > 40%
- **2%** of four yr colleges (50) are considered to be “**highly selective**”: admit rate < 20%, yield > 50%
- **99%** of college admissions stories in the media refer to the **4% most selective colleges**

**The goal of college admissions is
to find an authentic match
between an applicant and a
college.**



Why is College Admissions so Stressful?

1. **Demographics – more students applying (average applicant pool has doubled since 2006)**
2. **Ease of applying = more students applying to more colleges- 12 applications on average now vs 6 a decade ago**
3. **Rankings create illusion of distinction (USNWR etc)**
4. **Media hype, scary facts without context**
5. **Generational differences**
6. **Big disconnect between student/parental expectations and actual college admissions policies**



"We want you to have fun, as long as it's fun that enhances a college-admission application."

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The Big Disconnect Between Family Expectations and College Procedures:



Education Model:

Thanks, B. Alden (BAT) Thresher

- Father of private college admissions
- Wrote seminal piece, College Admissions and the Public Interest 1966
- Advocated for meritocracy vs aristocracy in admissions in order to build a solid, peaceful middle-class and to create a nation of knowledgeable citizens

Education Model

- **Considers the needs of 3 generations ahead**
- **Asks the question, “what does the nation/world need going forward?”**
- **Coordinates with government and communities (town/gown)**
- **Is a practice in meritocracy**
- **Dedicated to fairness and long-term peace**

When Did Things Begin To Change?

- **Started in the recession and demographic dip of the 1980s**
- **Outsourcing to accommodate shrinking budgets**
- **Overlap decision- 1993 (no more collaboration)**
- **Enrollment management techniques**
- **Generational change (WW2 gen to Baby Boomers, now to Gen-Xers)**
- **Technology and data mining**

Business Model

- **Focuses on that school's needs that year**
- **Focuses on beating the immediate competition**
- **Offers little sense of 'fairness' to the outside world but makes sense internally (insularity)**
- **Goes unexplained**
- **End goal is a higher ranking in USNWR to ensure future success**

College Admissions Business Model Formula

- **high application #s + low admit rate + high yield =**
higher ranking on USNWR =
more apps + bragging rights =
more alumni donations + better faculty =
higher application #s =

- **Increasing applications is the most important thing, so recruitment material is strategically seductive. Colleges then make it very easy for candidates to apply (Fast Apps, Common App).**

What Most Parents Expect

- **Colleges are selecting for educational reasons and that academic numbers (SATs, grades, rank) mean something.**
- **Colleges are reaching out to their child because those schools recognize their child's intrinsic value.**
- **Colleges mean what they say and have a sense of fairness.**

How Are Parents Choosing Colleges?

- **Reputation**
- **Advice from friends and family, IECs**
- **Hearsay**
- **Media information**
- **Info from back-in-the-day**
- **Geographical location**
- **etc**

How are Parents Choosing?





How Are Colleges Choosing?

- **Selecting applicants who fit the school's culture**
- **Winning/gaining against their competition**
- **Satisfying “institutional needs” (and therein lies the rub...)**

What Are “Institutional Needs”, the Critical Factor?

- **Creating ‘diversity’ and financial stability within the school’s cultural context by assuring that certain populations are admitted and enrolled.**
- **These needs are unique to each college and are not communicated to the public. They can change yearly and/or with each leadership change.**

Examples of Institutional Needs

- **Division 1 athletes**
- **Children of major donors**
- **Children of celebrity**
- **Children of prominent alumni**
- **National representation (best in state vs best anywhere)**
- **Ethnic/racial/gender diversity**
- **Diversity by major (civil eng. vs electrical eng)**
- **Diversity by extra-curricular involvements (tuba)**
- **No-need candidates**
- **Etc etc etc**

USNWR Algorithm

- In 2012, had 16 aspects in 7 major areas
- 4 of the 16 aspects were owned by the Admissions Office.
- Morse changes the weighting in these aspects from year to year to ensure a changing result. (creates drama, sells magazines)
- Says more about who is entering than what happens while enrolled. There is no evidence of quality of education.
- Can be manipulated and is manipulated by colleges.

USNWR Algorithm- General Areas

- **Undergraduate Academic Reputation (2 aspects)**
- **Student Selectivity for the Previous Entering Class (4 aspects)**
- **Faculty resources for the Previous Year (6 aspects)**
- **Graduation and Retention Rates (2 aspects)**
- **Financial Resources (1 aspect)**
- **Alumni Giving (1 aspect)**

USNWR Algorithm – Student Selectivity Aspects

- **Acceptance rate**
- **High school class standing in top 10%**
- **High school class standing in top 25%**
- **Critical reading and math portions of the SAT and the composite ACT scores**

USNWR Algorithm – Other Aspects

- Peer assessment survey
- High school GC ratings
- Faculty compensation
- % faculty with top terminal degree in their field
- % full-time faculty
- Student/faculty ratio
- Class size (1-19, 50+)
- Average graduation rate
- Average freshman retention rate
- Financial resources/student
- Average alumni giving rate

What Do Admissions Offices Do Poorly?

- **Share info about their school's culture**
- **Say clearly who they are looking for (“just apply”)**
- **Tell you how they admit**
- **Share institutional needs**
- **Discuss the societal implications of their work**
- **Don't know much about the lives of teenagers and their families due to insularity**

**Successful admissions really is
about the ‘FIT’.
This is often confused with
‘STRATEGY’.**

What Is Strategy?



Strategy...

- **Thinking it's a game to be mastered, guessing the "formula"**
- **Obsessing about the "formula": the family project**
- **Trying to force the child to be whom others expect them to be**
- **Pulling out all stops (calling in the chips)**
- **Early Decision misuse**

What Is 'Fit'?



What Is Fit?

- **Scores and grades fit the college's culture**
- **Learning and teaching styles are complimentary**
- **College brings out the best in the student**
- **College is happy to enroll the student**
- **Student is happy and engaged**

Key Concepts to Share With Clients for Savvy Admissions

- **Just because they sent lots of shiny stuff to you, doesn't mean they want to admit you. They just want an application.**
- **Guard your privacy – Don't pour your heart out.**
- **Don't 'friend' admissions officers. Grandma's rule.**
- **Look to identify the culture of the school and decide if it fits you. Ask. Evaluate the web site for why the school was founded.**
- **Don't just answer the essay questions. Each has an agenda.**

More Key Concepts To Share

- **You'll never figure out what the school needs to do for itself (institutional needs), so don't try.**
- **Take nothing personally.**
- **It's an initiation into your adulthood. All is well. Rejection is God's protection.**

Tips from an Admissions Officer...
Every application is a student's
'story' that helps determine the
match with the college's culture.

Tips from an admissions officer...

The key to successful admission is understanding a college's mission and culture and, if a match, writing the application through that filter.

Key questions for us all to ask:

What's the purpose of education?

**What's the purpose of Higher
Education?**



Let's redefine success...

**To laugh often and love much;
To win the respect of other people
And the affection of children;
To earn the approbation of honest
critics
And endure the betrayal of false friends;
To appreciate beauty;
To find the best in others;
To give of one's self;
To leave the world a little better
Whether by a healthy child,
A garden patch,
Or a redeemed social condition;
To have played and laughed with
enthusiasm
And sung with exultation;
To know that even one life has breathed
easier
Because you have lived.
This is to have succeeded.**

**What can we IECA members do to
move the conversation along?**



<http://Marileejones.com>