College Preparation Today

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Abstract

As college admissions and acceptance becomes more difficult due to the sheer number of

applicants, more students and parents have become focused on college preparation. This

preparation crosses three main areas: test preparation, quality of application, and written portions

of applications. This paper will delve into those three main areas to better understand the college

admissions process and the need for better preparation.

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College preparation has become an area of increasing concern or panic for many students and parents today. According to Patricia McDonough (1994), "although college access is easier now than twenty years ago, it is harder to get into what some people consider the 'right' college because of increased competition and standards" (McDonough p. 427). While this was written over 20 years ago, the sentiment is still true today. Students who are in higher socioeconomic brackets are now filing more applications to feel more certain about gaining acceptance into a college or university and that the colleges are attempting to raise their rankings through more early admission programs (McDonough, 2005 p. 4). With more students applying, and those students applying to more universities, the college admissions process has become arduous, taxing, and confusing to many parents and students.

When it comes to the college admissions process, the first step for many may be to identify schools in which they want to attend. The next step would then be to prepare for the ACT or SAT which are usually taken spring of a student's junior year of high school and can be retaken as needed. According to Joshua A. Fishman and Ann K. Pansanella (1960), "Testing by standardized aptitude and achievement examinations sponsored by regional or national associations became an accepted part of the admissions selection process" (Fishman and Pansanella p. 298). While some schools are moving to test optional practices, for most universities, standardized test scores are still a major factor in the admissions decision. For students, they currently have the option, in most cases, to take either the ACT or the SAT. While the tests used to be more similar in content, conditions, and timing (Perez 2002, p. 22), since the SAT was reintroduced by the College Board in 2016, there are now slight differences between SAT and ACT when it comes to timing, question focus, and answer types. The SAT was

redesigned to better predict college success. According to a College Board validity study, "The redesigned SAT was designed to cover the content/skills that research tells up matter most to college readiness" (Shaw et. al. 2016, p. 13). Currently, there are plans to change the ACT soon. However, there is one new factor to consider, in the recent past, some schools, like Wake Forrest University and others have made the decision to become test optional. This new policy has happened for a variety of reasons. Wake Forrest cited their major reason as diversifying applicants. The year after the policy went into effect, minority applications jumped up 70% (Soares 2012, p. 3). He went on to mention that grades were lower for first year college students but increased by the time of graduation to be like students that submitted standardized tests. One thing that parents and students do need to realize about this practice, is that most schools still require these tests even if the decision was made without submission.

One of the biggest concerns that many parents and students have is preparation for these standardized tests. While many schools do have programs that support the preparation of these tests, it is not always enough. Schools around the country have implemented apps, videos, or SAT and ACT content into math and English courses but that is where the preparation stops at many high schools. It is left to the parent and student to work from there. Online preparation websites such as Khan Academy have incorporated test prep into their website to allow students to have a more personalized plan of study. Other preparation sites may also include physical book options like the Princeton Review where they supplement the online learning with the book work. Khan Academy works with the College Board so tends to focus more on the SAT where the Princeton Review focuses on both tests. Students who are in higher socioeconomic brackets may opt for private tutoring through individuals or centers. In an interview with an owner of a Huntington Learning Center, Robert Harms, he said, "Tutoring centers have grown over the last

5-10 years due to the increasing push to earn higher scores" (Robert Harms, personal

communication, April 12, 2019). These centers offer a more personalized approach that is

specifically tailored to each student's needs. The goal of each of the preparation methods above

is to ensure that student is ready to take the standardized tests and reach a score allowing them

entrance into post-secondary education.

      Once a student has planned, prepped and taken the SAT and/or ACT, the next step would

be to start working on the application. The application consists of numerous factors that must be

obtained or completed before the application is complete. Some of these factors are: transcripts,

letters of recommendation, and the content on the application itself. While many of the high

schools that were looked at for this report had counselors or programs to help with the

application, many high schools were more limited in what they offered. School counselors not

only have to help with college preparation, but students' schedules, mental health and a variety

of other concerns. "With all of these responsibilities and increasing caseloads, school counselors

often allocate less time and attention to college counseling" (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry 2012,

p.49). Therefore, many schools are turning to other alternatives to help students with the timeline

and college application checklist. Naviance.com is one of the most widely used sources to

supplement the college counselor. In a Naviance exploratory study, counselors over time used

the site for transcripts, college planning and guidance tasks (Christian, Lawrence & Dampman

2017, p.39). Students also have access to Naviance where they can request transcripts and letters

of recommendation and the Common App.

      The application itself can be part of the application process that gets overlooked by both

counselors and students. There are many factors a student considers when looking to apply to

schools that relate to just the application. Because applications are accepted at lower rates due to

a rise in student applications and a stagnation of school size (Chade, Lewis & Smith 2014, p. 971), students must ensure that their application content will stand out. However, on the other side, application fees can hinder students from sending out too many applications. As of 2014, the average student sent out approximately 3 applications. This creates stress for the student to ensure that their small number of applications will be acceptable to ensure entrance into one of the few schools in which they applied. Extracurricular activities are one area on the application itself that students may be able to have an edge. There has been a shift away from traditional extracurricular activities towards volunteerism. According to Bound, Hershbein & Long (2009), "the percentage of college freshmen who regularly volunteered during their senior year of high school increased rapidly from about 45 percent in 1987 and 1988 up to about 70 percent by 2000" (Bound, Hershbein & Long p. 132). While there has been a shift away from clubs and organizational involvement, there is more of an emphasis on community involvement and volunteerism to help a student's chances of acceptance.

The Common Application is a more recent addition to the college admissions process. This application is accepted by more than 750 schools in and out of the United States. The motivation behind the creation of the common application was to simplify the application experience to make it easier for more people to apply (Boyington 2018, para. 2). While many schools do accept the Common Application or other universal applications, some schools may require an added section to the application that is unique to that school. For example, Wake Forest uses the Common App but also has students fill out a more detailed short answer section that is not found in the Common App. However, if a student uses Naviance to help with the college process, that information should be easily found on the college page.

One of the most daunting portions of the application come in the form of short answer questions and the personal essay. In conversations with English teachers around the country, many of them related that the most common application questions they receive are related to the personal essay questions. One reason for this is the underlying idea of the essay and what it can tell a university, "having prospective students write about their own experiences, interest, and goals can reveal something about the students themselves – the ways they think, their emotional states, and their general writing abilities" (Pennebaker, Chunk, Frazee, Lavergne & Beaver 2014, para. 2). The essay is one of the only parts of an application that doesn't just provide data, instead focusing on understanding who the individual is and what they can bring to a university. In talking to students, this is the one area many feel will make or break their admission.

One study looked at categorical dynamic index (CDI) ranging across eight different word types to find correlations with accepted students, GPA and essays. Looking at the data, there was a correlation between CDI score and GPA. This showed that there was a link between higher usage of categorical language and academic performance. A takeaway from this study is the idea that these essays can potentially be taught. This CDI model can be used to enhance college entrance essays to raise confidence of acceptance (Pennebaker et. al.). One of the major reasons that this CDI may be used is due to the sheer differences in essays that are submitted. Since admissions essays are over a wide range of topics, it becomes increasingly more difficult for admissions counselors to find common measuring tools.

There are also other factors to consider in the college admissions process like the FAFSA, and scholarships. The FAFSA is a government form used by both government and universities to determine how much aid a student will qualify for (Straus 1998, p. 69). While this form may seem straightforward, they do still need to be filled out carefully and correctly to

ensure that there are no penalties or crimes committed. While many students have help filling the

FAFSA out, some students will have to do it alone. One organization that helps Florida with the

FAFSA process is Florida C.A.N.! This organization works with schools across the state of

Florida to achieve the goal of 60% of the workforce having higher education degrees by the year

2025 ("Who We Are," 2017). This organization has taken steps towards that goal through the

creation of learning communities and special events such as College Decision Day or the Florida

FAFSA Challenge. What the Florida FAFSA challenge does is create a competition for Florida

high schools. This competition tracks students in Florida who fill out the FAFSA and awards

schools based on their participation. To help students with the process of filling out the FAFSA,

there are toolkits that are given to each student enrolled in schools participating. The goal is to

help more students fill out the FAFSA correctly to earn as much aid as possible which in turn

would give more funding to be able to attend post-secondary opportunities.

Scholarships are another area that can be confusing to students but important for their

financial package of entering college. Historically, "academically excellent students from

families unable to finance college for them could apply for competitive scholarships" (Toby

2009, p. 42). Currently with the focus on diversity in education, not all scholarships are based on

merit anymore. Scholarships have become so specialized that colleges or private

organizations/companies offer scholarships for a wide range of abilities or interests along with

academic achievement. This wide diversity of scholarships and the wide range of places that

offer them leave students inundated with opportunities for them to sort through. Although

websites like fastweb.com try to make the process easier through filters and questionnaires,

students may still feel uneasy about the process of applying.

Overall, the college process has become increasingly more difficult and more varied throughout history. Students are now applying to a wider range of colleges in more locations and are expected to be able to amass a variety of data to complete an application and finish the financial package before the end of their senior year of high school. Due to this increasing demand on students, schools and guidance counselors are working toward making the college process easier, but with increased variation from student to student, even that is becoming more difficult. Looking to the future, it seems that more colleges may go to test optional practices, some may look toward getting rid of college essays or new application research may spur applications in a new direction. Due to continuous changes in education, students need the creation of a club or organization on campus that will understand the changes and help guide students though their college decisions.

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