



Complexity in College Admission



Research Matters: Exploring the
Foundational Issues Associated with
Complexity in the College

Admissions Process – Fact or Fiction

Symposium on Admissions in the 21st
Century

July 24-25, 2012

Complexity in College Admission: Fact or Fiction?

“We don’t need any more op-ed pieces in the newspapers or magazines arguing from an anecdotal point of view whether or not the process is complex. We need evidence born out of quantitative research that helps us understand the dynamics of the issue.”

Bruce Walker, Chair, Task Force Implementation Committee

Complexity I: Goal

- Understand student and parent perceptions of complexity of application process
- Focus on mechanics of the admission process:
 - Securing information about admission options
 - Completing applications
 - Filing of applications

Complexity I: Survey Participants

- **Population and Sample**
 - **600 students** planning to enroll in a 4-year college in the fall of 2010
 - **300 parents** of students planning to enroll in a 4-year college in the fall of 2010 and who provided at least a little help during the application process
 - Split by East, West, and Mid-west/South regions
 - Quotas were set to ensure representation from lower-income and first-generation respondents
 - Telephone Survey

Complexity I : Key Findings

- The application process is **not** overly complex but moderately stressful
- Most confusing: Understanding how admission decisions were made
- Primary stressor: Different applications with different requirements
- “Common” applications receive high marks
- School counselors and teachers are extremely influential in the process

Report available:

http://advocacy.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/CB_Complexity_Report_2010_Web.pdf

Complexity II : Goal

- Specific look at perceptions of lower-income students and parents
 - What factors influence college application decisions
 - Is the process complex
 - What barriers get in the way of good application decisions
 - Lack of understanding
 - Lack of confidence
 - Other
 - What issues or people are influential in the decision

Complexity II: Survey Participants

- **Population and Sample**
 - 604 lower-income **students** ($\leq \$60,000$)
 - 100 higher-income **students** ($> \$60,000$)
 - 100 lower-income **parents** whose child also completed the survey
 - National geographic distribution
 - Telephone Survey

Complexity II : Key Findings

- Lower income students aspire to college and are confident about navigating the process
- Receive lots of information about college and are more likely to be influenced by it
- Especially value parental support in making application decisions; value contact from ‘students like me’
- Are more likely to be concerned about costs
- Are more likely to apply to fewer colleges
- Are more likely to apply to ‘less competitive’ colleges than their credentials might allow

Bottom Line

- Neither survey found high levels of complexity in the actual application process
- Both surveys exposed the value of focused information from colleges and the value of ‘common’ applications
- Both surveys endorsed the influence of ‘students like me,’ parents, school counselors and teacher mentors
- Both surveys identified ‘stress’ as a predominate emotional response born out of not understanding the decision making process as distinct from the application process

Disseminating the Findings

- A full blown report on each research effort was released on the Admission in the 21st Century website, initially drawing 20,000 hits upon the release of the first report
- A session at each of the last two College Board Forums drew large audiences
- A one-hour ‘webinar’ on each report in the *Learning to Lead: Admissions in the 21st Century* series drew over 2,000 registrants and well over 1,000 participants

What's Next?

Goal

55 percent
of nation's youth achieve
postsecondary credential
by 2025

Access to and success in college is critical

- Continue to share findings and recommendations with:
 - Admission officers
 - School counselors
 - Financial aid community
 - Policymakers
- Other areas that may warrant exploration:
 - “Melt” between college application and enrollment
 - What prevents students from beginning application process or causes them to end it prematurely
 - Related research on application volume; impact of financial aid on access; match/fit and retention
 - Support for counselors



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The College Board's Advocacy
and Policy Center

Admissions in the 21st Century

<http://admissions21.collegeboard.org>