

ADMISSIONS



# Simplifying College Admissions

Create the college culture you need for today's competitive admissions environment.

BY HOWARD AND MATTHEW GREENE

**T**HINK THE COLLEGE admissions picture couldn't get any more complicated? Guess again. Recent trends in college enrollment, applications and costs are likely to continue to baffle students, parents, and the schools and counselors trying to help them negotiate these uncertain times. Below are a few of the key admissions-related trends we have been tracking for some time, followed by suggestions on how to help your students find their way to higher education that work best for them. Let's start with

the assumption that college is worth the effort and cost for most students. Whether one considers pursuing a college education from the standpoint of a purely financial return on investment, the opening up of more career options, individual social and intellectual development, or the fostering of an informed democratic society, college makes sense. We believe that schools and school districts should create a *college-bound culture*. Such a culture fosters student understanding about what it takes to succeed in college and how to get there,

and it helps students by offering practical advice and the resources they need to develop and accomplish their goals.

### **Wishful Thinking**

Most parents agree that college matters, and it is the rare parent, or student for that matter, who does not begin school with the idea that something important will come from studying hard and learning more. Of course, there are discrepancies fostered by socioeconomic and educational inequalities between school dis- ►

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districts in different economic, demographic and cultural settings. But when it comes down to it, it is safe to say that parents typically want the best for their children, even if they don't know much about college or how to get there. Parents recognize that further education is essential for their children's future security. Schools can play an important role in educating whole families and communities about the importance of learning and postsecondary education. They can then provide the tools to help students get there.

Among families who have long considered college an integral part of raising their children, or families where parents didn't attend college but believe in the benefits of a college education leading to a better life for their children, there has been some wishful thinking going on of late. It starts with an acknowledgment of a few trends: the growing number of high school graduates and the rising cost of a college education. The number of high school graduates has increased from 2.5 million in 1996 to 3.3 million in 2008, according to the College Board and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education. Over the next 15 years, the number is predicted to stay between 3 and 3.5 million.

"We understand that this is the toughest admissions year for seniors applying to college, but then it's going to get easier, right?" such families will ask us. (Parents and students are asking their counselors and high schools the same question.) Unfortunately, we must disagree.

## More Applicants

Primary among the key trends that school districts must understand is the huge increase in the numbers not only of high school graduates but also of college applicants and attendees. You certainly are aware of the demographics of bigger class enrollments in your own school systems, although there are variations from state to state, region to region, and even within states. The "bubble" moving through many school systems is evident at

various age levels currently, but our view of the numbers nationally is that there is not going to be a precipitous drop in high school graduates, and thus college applicants, anytime soon. The numbers will plateau over the next few years but will not decrease to the lows experienced during the early 1980s.

There will be a diversification of the college applicant pool, with so-called nontraditional applicants, students of color, and first-generation college appli-

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—Matthew and Howard Greene

cants becoming a larger percentage of the college pool. Yet the aggressive marketing and enrollment management efforts begun by the colleges to counter lower applicant pools two decades ago have not only not abated, but they have increased and intensified, magnified by the explosion of the Internet. Selective colleges will continue to strive for a national applicant pool to counteract the tendency of most high school students to attend college within a few hundred miles of home. Public universities will continue to ramp up requirements in order to reduce campus growth while enrolling those interested and qualified from within their state, and from other states and abroad.

## International Students

Interest in U.S. colleges and universities among international students will continue to grow. More international students, especially from India and China and other developing countries—with their growing numbers of students able to afford an American education—will apply. These students will be qualified and focused, challenging the best and brightest, let alone the average American high school graduate. And that graduate will need the advantages of a higher educational degree in the increasingly

knowledge-based economy of the future. For those who haven't read Thomas Friedman's most recent edition of *The World Is Flat*, we encourage you to tackle its section on education and the competition our young people will face as they move into the global working world.

In sum, we have seen in the last several years the largest high school graduating classes in U.S. history, with the highest percentages of those applying to college. Selective colleges and universities, and not

just at the most competitive level, are seeing record numbers of applications, with institutions such as Boston University, UCLA, USC, or Yale receiving 20,000 to 50,000 applications for 1,500 to 4,500 freshman spaces! The marketing will continue, as will the need and desire to attend a four-year college or university, so high school seniors will continue to face more uncertainty, more unpredictability and more pressure. At the same time, a growing proportion of students will start their college education at a less selective and lower-cost two-year college—a real gateway to higher education.

## Higher Costs

The other big trend is the increasing cost of a public or private education. Unfortunately, college cost increases have far outpaced the rate of inflation, and today the cost of a public or private university education comprises a much higher proportion of a family's income. The share of an average four-year degree covered by the need-based Pell Grant program has decreased markedly. Student loan debt has ballooned, with the average debt of a four-year degree recipient climbing above \$20,000. Apocryphal stories abound of students (and parents) borrowing \$50,000, \$80,000, \$100,000 or more to pay for ►

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an elite private college education. Such stories scare many families away from college, even though this is not the norm. Yet private lenders now represent the fastest growing sector of the student loan market.

With the recent chaos in the loan industry, student lending quickly followed the home lending market into a period of upheaval. Yet stories of families' inability to borrow have been largely overplayed. There is still a lot of money available to help families afford college, in the form of federal and state need-based assistance (loans and grants), as well as need-based grants from colleges, including those like Princeton, the University of North Carolina, and Amherst College, for example, which have increased the grant aid and decreased or eliminated the loan debt of all or many of their aid recipients. Merit-based financial awards or discounts also have grown rapidly, so academically talented students, if they are smart and apply to a broad range of public and private institutions near and far from home, can open up significant savings opportunities. Many colleges offer students in the top third or even 40th percentile of that college applicant pool merit-based scholarships.

We encourage school districts to take a very active role in helping families understand how to pay for college, how to seek out and apply for need-based and merit-based financial assistance, and how not to let cost limit their goals and options. Low-cost examples of district activities include organizing a "planning and paying for college night," featuring financial aid and admissions officers from a local community, state or private college, or from several of them. Local nonprofits, certified financial planners, or independent educational consultants might also be willing and available to present at these gatherings and to conduct workshops to help families fill out aid and admissions applications.

### The Gender Gap

We have been writing for some time about a more hidden trend in higher education, which is the rise in the proportion of female applicants and enrollees. Women



*Among the various tips for students seeking the best college or university for them, district leaders should encourage students to use SAT and ACT test prep companies.*

now comprise some 59 percent of the college population in this country. The situation is more lopsided at many private liberal arts colleges and flagship public universities, with 60 to 65 percent female matriculants, and applicant pools that can be even more heavily imbalanced. This trend raises a number of concerns. Sociologically, one worries about the low ratio of educated male peers to such a large number of highly educated young women. The trend is particularly pronounced among Hispanic and African-

American students.

At colleges, neither men nor women seem to like an environment that tilts above 60 percent of one gender (single-sex institutions excepted). Socially, both genders tend to suffer. In terms of applications, the obvious dangers have been proven out. Colleges are giving preferential treatment to male applicants in some admission situations, even at highly selective institutions, where they need more men to enroll. Women are then being held to a higher standard and are finding them-

## Quick College Admissions Tips

**Create a college-bound culture.** Encourage students to use test prep companies that offer SAT and ACT classes at discounts. Have students find the right college matches and help students apply for financial aid.

**Work with colleges and local nonprofits.** Invite financial aid and admissions officers into the district for a "planning and paying for college night." Local nonprofits, certified financial planners, or independent educational consultants might conduct workshops to help families fill out aid and admissions applications.

**Find available money.** Federal and state need-based loans and grants from some colleges have increased the grant aid and decreased the loan debt of many of their aid recipients.

**Target eighth-graders.** Instill in middle school and/or freshman year that every class and every year counts toward college. Encourage students to take as many college prep and advanced classes as possible.

**Encourage girls.** District administrators should encourage girls to take rigorous math and science courses and apply to a wider range of colleges.

**Push the SAT and SAT Subject Tests.** The College Board recently changed its testing program to allow students total "score choice," which means that students can take the SAT and Subject Tests, of which there are 21, any number of times and submit only the scores they want to show during senior year.

**Include parents.** Give parents from freshman year onward an annual or semiannual presentation on college admissions, what you are doing, and what they and their college-bound children should be doing at each stage.

selves rejected or put on waiting lists while similarly or less qualified men are admitted to balance out a class. This new "gender affirmative action" has turned the admissions world on its head in the course of one generation, and it holds true in many graduate programs as well. The STEM fields seem to be the last holdout where men are numerically dominant, but one wonders how long that will remain the case.

District administrators must encourage girls to apply to a wider range of colleges, and be aware that beneath admissions statistics, girls may have a harder time getting into the same colleges as boys. Girls should take rigorous math and science course to compete. Perhaps your district can establish a mentoring program to encourage girls in fields like engineering and computer science. The Westover School in Middlebury, Conn. ([www.westoverschool.org](http://www.westoverschool.org)) provides this kind of program in an independent school environment with its Women in Science and

Engineering program and relationship with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

### What Can You Do?

In the face of state budget challenges, the reluctance of local town councils to pass too many tax increases, and the rising cost of diesel fuel, heating oil, health insurance, and benefits, how is a school or district to help students and parents access higher education in a sounder and more productive manner?

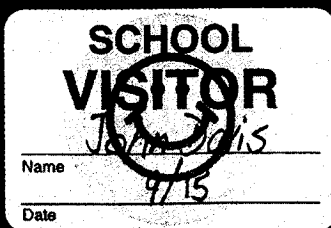
Student counselor ratios can range from 300 or 400 to 1 in the best instances, and 800 or 1,000 to 1 in the worst. And these counselors often handle more than just college admissions counseling, so they really have their hands full. Yet one does not have to hire five new guidance counselors (though it would be nice) or create a million dollar program to create a college-bound culture in your district or school and to focus on improving knowledge of and access to higher education.

There are abundant free or low-cost materials you can access to help create a great college planning program (see Resources for some examples). Many colleges are desperate to help you help your students focus on college admissions. Many test prep companies offer SAT and ACT classes at significant discounts, and will often include some type of on-site and/or Web-based college planning platform as part of a package. Parent, community or local college student volunteers can help create, staff and support a program in your district.

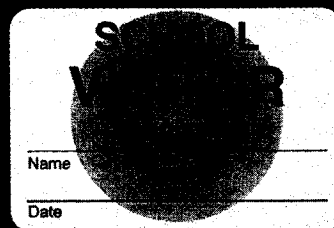
Fundamentally, it is the job of a whole school, an entire district, to create a college-bound culture. It begins with the expectation that motivated students can make it. They can take appropriate college prep courses, find the right college matches for them, and accomplish the admissions process and financial aid process—if necessary, with your help. Of course, there will be students for whom college is ►

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not the right path, and you will need to help them plan for appropriate noncollege options, from career and vocational planning to military, public or community service possibilities.

## Start Early

It is best to meet your freshmen, even your eighth-graders, with the notion that high school is a pathway to college and that to get to college, every class and every year counts. That doesn't entail putting undue pressure or stress on students. You can reassure them that there are many things they don't need to worry about, including essays, interviews, or

## Include Everyone

While some districts face the onslaught of the dreaded "helicopter parent" obsessed with every aspect of college admissions to the detriment of school, child, and college admissions officer, many others face the challenge of getting parents more involved in the education of their children and getting parents and students to see themselves as college material. In general, we find most parents can find a happy medium between overinvolvement and underinvolvement, and if they believe the school has a plan and program that is preparing their child for college admission, they will be satisfied.

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special, magic activities that will somehow make them stand out.

Their number one job is to take college prep courses as much as possible, and more demanding classes if appropriate to their interests and abilities, and to perform consistently well. Over time, they will take standardized tests like the SAT, ACT, and SAT Subject Tests that will be predominately based on reading, writing and math skills, as well as individual subject area knowledge.

The College Board, purveyor of the SAT programs, recently changed its testing policy to allow students total "score choice", which means that students can take the SAT and Subject Tests, of which there are 21, any number of times and submit only the scores they want to show during senior year.

Thus, a freshman biology or sophomore student taking world history class might want to take the SAT Subject Test in that area with no risk of showing a "bad score" down the line. It is this kind of early planning and portfolio building that will empower your students as they grow through high school.

The focus of most families is on *process* rather than *outcome*, and if you include parents from freshman year onward in an annual or even semiannual presentation on college admissions and what you are doing, and what they and their college-bound children should be doing at each stage, you will go a long way toward helping them and helping your staff, not to mention college admissions outcomes. By including everyone of all ages, backgrounds and levels, you will expose them to necessary information and perhaps convince those sitting on the fence that college is an important and viable option. The good news is that there are many such options among the several thousand two- and four-year institutions of higher education in America, and that a student with a good work ethic and open mind will find a right choice among them. **DA**

*Howard and Matthew Greene are independent educational consultants working with families on college planning. They have written books on college admissions, including the Greenes' Guides to Educational Planning, and are hosts of TV programs on admissions.*



*A unique college prep charter school, KIPP AMP, has extended days and two hours of homework daily for fifth- through eighth-graders.*

## College admissions program models and planning materials

### ACT,

[www.act.org](http://www.act.org).

Offers academic and career planning tools, as well as the ACT test, the primary competitor to the SAT.

### The College Board,

[www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com).

Offers administrators and students the SAT and Advanced Placement (AP) test programs.

### Greenwich High School,

[www.greenwichschools.org/page.cfm?p=5348](http://www.greenwichschools.org/page.cfm?p=5348).

Senior Packet shows students and parents how to furnish detailed questionnaires to counselors and follow a specific plan of action for admissions in a large and diverse high school.

### Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP),

[www.kipp.org](http://www.kipp.org).

This national network of free, open-enrollment, college preparatory public schools focuses on underserved students.

### National Association for College Admission Counseling,

[www.nacacnet.org](http://www.nacacnet.org).

Professional association for college admissions officers and guidance counselors. See its Knowledge Center Project for program resources, as well as its Seal of Approval program.

### Naviance,

[www.naviance.com](http://www.naviance.com).

Many public and private schools are using Naviance's WorkspaceK12 program to manage their college planning and other functions. It is fast becoming the industry standard.

### Peterson's,

[www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com).

In addition to being a test preparatory company, Peterson's offers a lot of free resources for students and schools, as well as programs that work with schools and districts.

### Student Aid on the Web,

[www.studentaid.ed.gov](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov).

The federal government's help and resource center on financial aid and paying for college.

### Ten Steps to College with the Greenes,

[www.pbs.org/tenstepstocollege](http://www.pbs.org/tenstepstocollege).

Our Web site developed in conjunction with our PBS programs, with free resources for counselors and families.