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IDEAS

# The College-Admissions Process Is Completely Broken

But it doesn't have to be.

By Jeffrey Selingo



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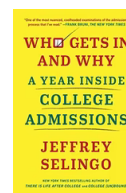
*Updated at 5:25 p.m. on April 18, 2022.*

With the last of the college-admissions decisions for the high-school class of 2022 arriving in the coming days, we're likely at the end of another record application year. According to the organization that runs the Common App, application volume through the middle of February increased nearly 10 percent from the preceding year—which itself was up some 10 percent from the year before that. Over the past two decades, the number of applications submitted to colleges has increased more than 150 percent, even as the size of high-school graduating classes has remained fairly stable.

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This might sound like good news, but the growing volume of applications hurts colleges and students alike. Flooded with applications and crunched for time, admissions officers quickly scan the files of most students who have no prayer of getting in and spend just minutes reviewing those they ultimately accept—something I witnessed the year I spent embedded in three admissions offices for my latest book. While piles of applications and an ultra-low acceptance rate are certainly marks of popularity, these things are in truth indications of a poorly designed system in need of long-overdue improvements.

Much of the dysfunction stems from a misperception about how hard getting into college is. At hypercompetitive schools, ridiculously low acceptance rates have become the norm: 5 percent at Stanford University, 10 percent at Colby College, and 12 percent at Vanderbilt for fall 2020. But selectivity is something of an illusion, stressing students out and leading them to needlessly apply to multiple colleges when they can enroll in only one. The overwhelming majority of colleges admit most



### Who Gets In And Why - A Year Inside College Admissions

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students who apply. Seventy-five percent of schools that use the Common App accept more than half of their applicants. Yet “students come to the Common App thinking they aren’t going to get in anywhere, but they will,” Jenny Rickard, president and CEO of the Common App, told me. In other words, plenty of spots are out there, just not at the small set of elite institutions whose freshman classes have barely budged in size since the late 1970s.

Read: [Elite-college admissions are broken](#)

A better way exists. Colleges could alleviate the congestion and stress they created—and provide relief to both schools *and* students in the process, even at selective schools—by reforming the application system.

First, colleges need to be straightforward about their selection criteria. Although the average four-year college in the U.S. accepts nearly 60 percent of applicants, many schools indicate they are more selective than they are by telling prospective students that they practice “holistic” admissions, considering factors beyond grades and test scores. This approach, which attempts to measure qualities that aren’t quantifiable and are usually gleaned from an applicant’s extracurricular activities, essays, and recommendations, is loved and hated in equal measure by parents and students. Both favor a method that focuses on the “whole student” until they discover that applicants who had lower GPAs or test scores were accepted.

Holistic admissions may sound great, but many admissions offices at less-selective colleges make the bulk of their decisions by assessing the rigor of an applicant’s high-school courses and grades. In some cases, ACT and SAT scores matter, too, although many colleges have made the tests optional

during the coronavirus pandemic. Amassing impressive lists of extracurricular activities and hiring essay coaches end up being futile in the admissions process at colleges where the high-school transcript drives the decision. Lengthy application forms also place a particularly unfair burden on students without access to resources such as college counselors, supportive parents or teachers, and even a computer with reliable internet access.

Last year, the Common App experimented with something called direct admission, turning the traditional process upside down: Instead of filling out form after form, students are proactively admitted based on data supplied by K–12 schools or basic information provided by students. About 3,300 students were offered guaranteed admission to a school in their state if they met a GPA requirement; some 66 students ultimately took part in the pilot project. Although this is a small group, officials at the Common App told me that more than half of the respondents to the offer were first-generation college students. Last year, some 700,000 seniors who opened Common App accounts never filed an application. Typically, those students tend to be lower-income, first-generation, and from minority backgrounds, Don Yu, the vice president of policy and advancement at the Common App, said.

[Read: Elite-college admissions were built to protect privilege](#)

Second, colleges could eliminate binding early decisions, which pressure seniors to apply to one college by a fall deadline and pledge to attend if accepted. Early decision leaves students with the impression that there's only *one right college* for them. For some, early decision has become the new regular decision.

Selective colleges are filling more of their incoming classes early to reduce the uncertainty of regular-decision cycles, in which students might be weighing

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acceptances from multiple schools. Barnard finalized 62 percent of the seats in this fall's freshman class before it even considered regular-decision applications. Boston University filled about 50 percent of its class early; a decade ago, it enrolled just 13 percent of the class early. The University of Pennsylvania filled 51 percent of its class early this year.

Teenagers know this, so early decision has turned into an angst-ridden Hunger Games to get into a super-selective school. They don't necessarily love the college; they just love their chance of admission. A single application deadline without early decision is not unheard-of: The University of California has one and this year still attracted more than 210,000 applicants for its nine campuses.

Finally, selective colleges can ask for far less to determine an applicant's chances. Stephen Farmer, the vice provost for enrollment at the University of Virginia, wonders if there is a "more iterative way" of asking for materials. Instead of making the application process an enormous burden students must finish all at once, information from applicants could be gathered in chunks at different stages of the process. Transcripts could be submitted at the first stage, recommendations at another stage, and essays at yet another, allowing schools to narrow the pool efficiently, and ensuring that students don't spend unnecessary time or energy preparing materials.

"We should be looking at our [application process] hard, every hoop we ask students to jump through," Farmer told me. "There are a lot of assumptions that we make about things that matter and they don't," such as colleges that count up the number of AP courses an applicant has taken as a measure of rigor.



Indeed, that's the dirty secret I learned the year I watched admissions offices review applications: Most don't know exactly what they're trying to assess when they ask for multiple essays and recommendations as well as an encyclopedic list of activities. Highly selective colleges like to talk about how they "craft a class," but let's not kid ourselves about that level of precision. In reality, the schools are not choosing a class as much as they are sending out invitations to join a class. Not every student will RSVP "Yes." At Northwestern, just 60 percent do so, meaning four of every 10 accepted students say "No thanks." At Wesleyan (no slouch in the prestige department), a mere 35 percent take the college up on its offer. So despite all of that anxiety students have about getting into a certain school, the truth is that most of the elite, highly selective schools' student bodies are just somewhat different combinations drawn from the same pool of applicants.

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The Common App and the internet allowed students to apply to college with the click of a button, but the actual process is not so simple.

If early decision is eliminated at selective colleges, opening up more spots in the regular round, teenagers will stress less about picking one school on which to place their early bet. A world where direct admission is a new way in at the bulk of colleges, and where the application overall is less burdensome, will encourage students to balance their list, because they'll know early on in their senior year if they got in somewhere or have a real shot at a top college well before final decisions come out in March. In the end, such long-needed changes to the application process might make high school less a game of jumping through hoops for the college application and more about making friends, joining student government, enjoying homecoming, and taking interesting classes—in short, more about having a more meaningful

experience, and one that prepares them for the college students they'll become.

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*This piece previously stated that the acceptance rates for Stanford, Colby and Vanderbilt were from 2021. In fact, they were from 2020.*

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