What Admissions Officials Think

A Chronicle survey finds uneasiness over rising costs, recruitment, and public opinion

By ERIC HOOVER

Over the past two decades, college admissions has become a prime-time preoccupation. Most people know at least something about the process, especially if they have a teenager in high school and a college guide on their coffee table. Nonetheless, widespread public misconceptions persist about admissions requirements, the selection process, and the costs of attending a four-year institution, according to an extensive survey of college admissions officials conducted by The Chronicle.

The survey, completed recently by several hundred senior-level admissions deans and enrollment managers, reveals the complexities of the profession during a time of intense scrutiny from parents, college presidents, and a host of other parties with stakes in the annual selection process. "It's a much more public job than it once was," says Bruce J. Poch, vice president and dean of admissions at Pomona College. "Now admissions is seen as the point where someone's piece of the American pie might be stolen by somebody else."

When asked to name the most common public misconception about admissions, 32 percent of respondents cited a lack of understanding of the admissions process, including how officials evaluate applicants, the level of selectivity at most colleges, and the importance of various admissions criteria. "There is a misconception that the process is complicated and it's hard to get into universities," wrote a female admissions official at a public institution, in response to an open-ended question in the confidential survey. "That may be true for highly selective institutions, but for the vast majority of higher-education institutions across this country, the process is straightforward and clearly stated."

Eighteen percent of respondents said the most common misperception was that most colleges are not affordable, and 10 percent cited confusion about how financial aid works. A male admissions official at a private college suggested that recent changes in financial-aid policies at very wealthy institutions, such as Harvard University, had fueled the misguided notion "that colleges are sitting on a hoard of cash, and if we chose, we could charge no tuition."

That's not to say admissions officials do not fret about financial issues. When asked to name the most important problem facing admissions officers today, 34 percent cited affordability and cost — by far the most common response. But how colleges with relatively small endowments should help families pay for college during an economic downturn remains a difficult question.

A majority of the senior-level admissions officials surveyed (60 percent) hold a positive or somewhat positive view of using merit aid to shape classes. Yet only 8 percent of respondents said their colleges had revamped their financial-aid policies as a result of recent changes by rich institutions, and only 10 percent were considering doing so. Sixty-seven percent said their institutions had not considered such a change. Most cannot afford it. As one admissions official at a public university wrote, his institution has "champagne expectations" but only a "beer budget."

The Chronicle's online survey was sent to 2,081 senior-level admissions deans and enrollment managers. A total of 461 officials, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, responded — a rate of 22 percent, a respectable figure...
for a survey of this kind. Maguire Associates, an educational-consulting firm in Bedford, Mass., conducted the survey and analyzed the results for the *The Chronicle*.

The survey provides a rare glimpse at the leaders who have become key figures on their campuses and in their communities, and who, to varying degrees, simultaneously serve as gatekeepers, promoters of educational values, and protectors of their institutions' bottom line.

Who are admissions officials? They are overwhelmingly white (89 percent), and 61 percent are male. Three-fourths are 40 to 65 years old. A substantial proportion, 28 percent, are graduates of the institutions where they work. They also work long hours: Nearly three-fourths reported putting in 50 hours a week or more, with 28 percent saying they worked at least 60 hours.

Many of those hours have little to do with reading applications. Seventy percent of top admissions officials spent a "high" or "very high" percentage of time communicating with other campus offices, such as financial aid or development — more than any other task. Some 67 percent spent roughly the same amount of time supervising, managing, or training staff members. By contrast, only 20 percent of respondents said they spent a "high" or "very high" amount of time communicating with prospective students.

Senior-level officials are generally happy with their current positions. Fifty-five percent said they were "mostly satisfied" with their jobs, while 25 percent said they were "extremely satisfied." In general, admissions pays well. A third of respondents earn $60,000 to $90,000 a year, and 22 percent earn $130,000 or more. Among respondents who expressed moderate or little satisfaction with their jobs, the two most prominent sources of dissatisfaction were scarcity of resources, unrealistic expectations, and dysfunctional offices. And on many campuses, there's the uncertainty of predicting admissions outcomes. "My success," wrote a male admissions official at a public institution, "is determined by the decision-making prowess of 17-year-olds."

Resources vary greatly among admissions offices, the survey found. Nearly half of respondents said their offices had an annual budget of $100,000 to $900,000; 20 percent had budgets of $2-million or more.

Although technology plays a larger role than ever in marketing and recruiting, admissions offices continue to devote a large proportion of their resources to in-person activities. On average, printed materials, such as viewbooks and brochures, account for 24 percent of admissions budgets, and 22 percent goes toward events like school visits and college fairs. Only 11 percent is allocated to Web sites or other electronic formats. More than two-thirds of respondents use student blogs on their Web sites, and more than half have virtual campus tours.

The *Chronicle* survey revealed several key distinctions between the admissions landscape at different types of colleges. For instance, the average discount rate — the proportion of grant aid relative to the total amount of gross tuition and fees — is significantly higher at religious institutions (37 percent) and secular private colleges (35 percent) than at public institutions (19 percent). As for "legacies," they accounted for 11 percent of students at religious colleges, 8 percent at private colleges, and 13 percent at public institutions, on average.

Many respondents said their office engages students, coaches, and faculty members in recruiting. Alumni, however, remain an underutilized resource in admissions, says John Maguire, chairman of Maguire Associates. Only 22 percent of private colleges said they used alumni in recruiting, and just 15 percent of religious institutions and 11 percent of public colleges did so. "Engaging alumni at all stages of admissions can be very effective," says Mr. Maguire, a former admissions director at Boston College. "It's one way that colleges can balance the demands for high-touch and high-tech approaches."

Refining recruitment strategies is a constant concern for many admissions officials. "It's one of the most complex times ever in admissions," says Peter E. Caruso, associate director of admissions at Boston College. "There's uncertainty because of the economy and changing demographics. Are families still going to be willing to invest in private postsecondary education?"

Many admissions officials have worried about how projected declines in the number of high-school graduates and a rapidly diversifying pool of applicants will complicate their operations. Forty-five percent of the respondents said...
their offices had already developed plans for dealing with those changes, while 43 percent said such strategies were in development. Of those with existing plans, 57 percent said their plan was "somewhat strong."

As always, colleges continue to compete for various types of students. Forty-four percent of the respondents said their institutions had a "high" or "very high" need to increase the enrollment of ethnically diverse students, and 45 percent reported a "high" or "very high" need to recruit more high-ability students. Other findings confirmed the prevalence of standardized-test scores in admissions, with 87 percent of respondents saying their colleges required submission of ACT or SAT scores. Admissions officials were divided over the value of the standardized writing tests; however, 32 percent of those who require or consider test scores said the writing tests had "no influence" on admissions decisions, yet 50 percent said they had "moderate" or "great" influence.

Over all, respondents confirmed the integrity of the admissions process. For instance, most officials said they only "occasionally" or "rarely" felt pressure to admit students for nonacademic reasons, such as an applicant's athletic ability or connection to an alumni or donor. Most said they "never" or "rarely" felt pressure to admit a student because of his or her ability to pay.

The survey did confirm widespread anecdotes about two commonly cited trends in admissions — the growing numbers of "helicopter parents" and "stealth applicants," students whose first contact with a college is their application. Half of the respondents said parental involvement in admissions had increased greatly at their colleges, and half said they had an organized marketing plan for parents of prospective students. Forty-one percent said the number of stealth applicants had increased greatly.

Finally, at a time when students are filing more applications than ever, many colleges continue to consider the perceived likelihood that a particular student will matriculate. Although that factor may play only a minor role in admissions decisions, one-third of the respondents said it was "moderately" or "highly" important in their evaluations of applicants.

Amid colleges' increasing competition for students, many admissions officials believe that applicants are more stressed than they were a decade ago. Fifty-three percent said admissions anxiety had increased, and 21 percent said it had increased greatly. Admissions officials themselves have their own sources of stress. One constant, wrote a male admissions official at a religious college, is "dealing with deans and faculty that do not understand the market-driven nature of enrollment in higher education today."

And that relates to the definitive tension in the admissions field: How to balance market realities with educational values.

"There's a lot of concern among my colleagues about mission drift," says Philip A. Ballinger, director of admissions at the University of Washington. "In some admissions offices, I'm not sure there's a huge difference between the culture you'd find there and what you'd find in a commercial enterprise."

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