THE 8 THINGS I WISH EVERYONE KNEW ABOUT COLLEGE ADMISSION

By Jon Boeckenstedt

Congratulations to the 2020 Muir Award winner, Jon Boeckenstedt, who won for his Admitting Things *blog, which is widely respected and seen as a clear, compassionate voice backed up by data. With his finger on the pulse of college admission and enrollment management, his fearless writing insightfully supports our profession and the students we serve. We appreciate him contributing this column.*

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Perhaps it's our own fault: We selected this very esoteric profession and we have to put up with the confusion. At least most of us did.

When I started in admission in 1983, it wasn't an active choice—it was mostly out of necessity. My student loans were coming due and I had to come up with $52.79 every month for the next seven years to repay the $3,500 I had borrowed to get a bachelor's degree. The economy was tough and I traded one job talking to strangers (selling cable TV door-to-door) for another with a starting salary of $11,000. But at least in this job, the people were interested in talking to me, which makes all the difference for an introvert.

Back then, few people I met or talked to socially seemed to be interested in what I did or even inquired about the facts or the nuances of my job. It was just a job to me and to people who were my friends. They didn't care about college admission and I didn't ask about ledgers or legal briefs or journalism.

When admission work—and admission in general—became something else I can't quite pinpoint. But when our national fascination with the quest for the best came to the forefront, friends and neighbors started asking me a lot of questions, and it was kind of fun to talk about it. What was once just another job became a subject of interest and while I could never fully explain it, I felt it my duty to give it a shot. Looking back, I'm guessing it would take three years of doing the job—the weeks on the road; the file review; the parent, student, and counselor interactions; the same question a thousand times—to have the experience necessary to explain this profession to others.

So, it was interesting and puzzling to me at about that time, to see people who had never done our work start to write about it, opine about it, and make general pronouncements about it.

This has turned out to be considerably less fun than the job I've grown to love, because too often, I've found, they're wrong. They might have their facts straight but lack nuance. They might see a few examples and make general pronouncements that don't hold up under scrutiny. They often make comparisons that seem disparaging or even mean between what we do and what other professions do. They might be victims of their own privileged upbringing, which makes them think their little slice of reality is the only reality.

I'm under no illusions, of course, that a piece in a professional journal will disabuse people of the notions and prejudices they carry with them, but I have a bad habit of, in the words of the late great newspaper columnist Molly Ivins (quoting a politician from Texas), "beating my head against a dead horse." As someone who almost didn't go to college at all, I think making a difference in the lives of students is worth it, even if I'll never know how many--if any--I've influenced. And, of course, I think the work we do is special and worth defending. So, here I sit with my keyboard, trying to distill over 35 years into a few thousand words.

To that end, I've pulled together a list of the big things people misunderstand or get wrong about what we do for a living, and I've added a few thoughts to steer them in the right—excuse me—in my direction. Here goes:

Admission is not a process of skimming the "best" off the top. In the first place, we can't define "best." But even if we could, selecting a class of nothing but "the best" would be pretty boring, the process wouldn't need people to do it, and the outcome wouldn't be very interesting. With intellectual life at the center of any university, "interesting" is important, but that's hard to explain. Parents know they don't always hire the applicant with the most years of experience, or the best GPA, or the one who graduated from the brand-name university, but it's still hard for them to grasp how admission works, especially at the most selective institutions. In the words of Femi Ogundele at University of California—Berkeley, admission should be looking for "excellence, not perfection."

Of course we think about money. A colleague once told me, "Without margin, there is no mission." You can't run a university on good deeds and goodwill. The electric company wants cash each month; the faculty expect their paychecks will hit their accounts on the last day of the pay period; and test tubes and superconducting nuclear magnetic spectrometers aren't free. Too many people think "not-for-profit" means "charity." It doesn't and it shouldn't. What makes us different is where we draw the line: Profit is not our motivator.

Graduation rates are inputs, not outputs. Malcolm Gladwell clarified selection effects and treatment effects in his terrific article on college admission in *The New Yorker*. You don't become beautiful by going to modeling school; you're selected because you're beautiful to start with. That's a selection effect. You don't get chosen to become a marine; what happens in basic training makes you one. That's a treatment effect.

Similarly, if your selection process admits mostly children of wealthy, college-educated parents, who have known since third grade that they're expected to graduate from college, or if you can provide extraordinary financial assistance to that small group of students who don't fall into that category, your graduation rates are going to be high. It's another example of selection effect. Your graduation rate is inversely related to the amount of risk you take in the admission process. If you take few risks in admission, your graduation rates are going to be a lot higher.

We don't really live in a meritocracy. I once heard University of Wisconsin–Madison professor Harry Brighouse speak about the differences in the US and British education systems and a point he made has stuck with me. In America, he said, we think merit and achievement are the same thing. But no one, he pointed out, gets to achieve anything unless someone invests in them, so students who are the beneficiaries of that investment might have achieved a great deal—but that's not the same thing as merit. It does explain, however, why people who can invest in their children might equate the two.

It means that wealth looks good on applications when trying to measure "merit" if what you're really looking for is achievement. And it means, of course, that "merit aid" flows to students who have had the benefit of parental or societal investment, and those students are not always the ones who need it or deserve it. It's just a way to justify the practice. Instead of being agents of social change, the admission office may be at the heart of the problem of educational inequity, usually, at the behest of the powers in the university.

Standardized tests aren't academic qualifications. Some parts of the SAT and ACT clearly measure what a student has learned. If that's all they measured, they'd maybe (big maybe) be useful tools in the admission process. They also—to a greater or lesser degree—measure emotional control, speed processing, and formal preparation and practice, among other things, which may or may not be valuable in college. Choosing the "right" answer from four given might be a skill you'd rather have than not, but good luck applying it in philosophy class.

We have no standardized American high school curriculum, so we're giving these tests to many students who have never had the opportunity to learn the content, through no fault of their own. The tests don't measure "aptitude" or "native ability" and never have, despite the monikers once attached to them. And as barriers to the gated communities of academia, they serve merely as minor obstacles to the wealthy, and impenetrable impediments to those without the social, financial, and cultural capital to overcome them. In that sense, they are great tools to use in perpetuating inequality.

Virtually every lawsuit suggesting that admission processes are illegal is based on the premise that "I was more qualified because my test scores were higher." Pull that premise out from underneath and watch the argument collapse on itself.

There is no such thing as need-blind admission. While it's true that at many colleges the admission officer can't see FAFSA data, that would be *FAFSA-blind* admission.

The fact is that you can see need in almost every line of most applications and you'd have to be willfully ignorant not to recognize it. Put aside for a minute that most colleges don't have sufficient application volume to even have the luxury of considering ability to pay. Those that do expect successful applicants to have most of the trappings of wealth: the AP classes available at well-resourced schools, great personal statements honed for weeks or months with professionals; high test scores bolstered by months of test prep; letters of recommendation written by teachers who are trained in workshops by the very people reading them; leadership or stellar accomplishments enabled by private lessons or the freedom from after-school jobs; and often college-educated parents who call the institution their alma mater. Only when colleges consider race and ethnicity do lower-income and first-generation students with high need get a chance at a break in the process. That, of course, is the one thing people with all the other advantages like to complain about the most.

We don't always set the agenda, but we're expected to carry it out. People who blame the admission office might be right to a point. But the university mission and the strategy to accomplish it, as well as the objectives the dean or director or vice president gets measured against, are set much higher up the food chain. A good admission or financial aid function can and should serve as the nexus between external markets and the internal workings of the academy, but it doesn't always work out that way. Boards of Trustees are often filled with businesspeople, some of whom don't understand—and don't always like—the way colleges run.

Admission isn't a crap shoot, but it ain't rocket science either. Very few colleges admit many, if any, unqualified students into their institutions. And while it's easy to predict how a class will perform, it's much harder to predict how an individual student will perform. That's what makes admission so frustrating and so rewarding at the same time. The average GPA of the freshman class after one year is almost pre-ordained; but some superstars will flunk out and some of those students you took a chance on will become stars themselves. The illusion of precision in admission is a fairy tale we tell ourselves.

I couldn't have imagined when I set out on my first admission trip that I'd still be connected to the profession almost four decades later, and I suppose I couldn't have believed we'd have to be explaining and defending what we do and how we do it. It's important, I think, for us to admit when we don't live up to the expectations we set for ourselves, but it's also important to defend and provide context for the people who talk about, write about, and legislate for our profession. We're the ones who live the reality of the work, both the rewards and risks, and at certain times, it's an 18-hour a day job we all love.

I hope you agree that what we do is worth defending and worth fighting for.

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