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**Fifty Years of
College Choice:**

*Social, Political
and Institutional
Influences on
the Decision-
making Process*

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Acknowledgments

This publication originated in discussions among doctoral students at Indiana University who were concerned about current issues and trends confronting prospective college students and college admissions and enrollment staff. Our earlier study of high school students' college-choice process revealed varied approaches to decision making and complex interactions among institutions and prospective students. As we searched the literature for accounts of the college-choice process, we grew increasingly curious about continuity and change in that process: How had the expansion of access to higher education altered students' college choice? When did college admissions work become professionalized? We are grateful for the opportunity to explore these questions and to produce this publication.

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Executive summary

The college-choice process is complex and affects many: high school students, family members and public policy-makers, as well as institutions of higher education. This report provides an overview of the college-choice process for traditional-age students and examines how it has evolved during the last half of the 20th century. Material from the College Board and the National Association of College Admissions Counselors and popular literature were all data sources for this review.

This report analyzes how student and family characteristics, institutional admissions policies and practices, and public policies have influenced the manner and timing of students' college-choice decisions. Specifically, the report examines the following three topics:

- Shifts in public policy regarding post-secondary access, equity and financial aid.
- Changes in recruitment, marketing, admissions practices and financial aid.
- Other institutional practices that have shaped the college-choice process.

Clearly, the college-choice process has changed significantly during the past 50 years for a variety of reasons, including changes in student

demographics and in developments in colleges' admissions recruitment and marketing practices. Prior to the 1950s, fewer than two of every 10 high school graduates went on to college. There was limited guidance literature available to

students, and their decisions were largely determined by personal values or by vague notions of a college's reputation or its facilities. Fewer women, students of color, or low-income students either planned for or attended college. As access to higher education became an important item on the public policy agenda, the college-choice process was

also transformed. The enactment of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the "GI Bill"), the Truman Commission's recommendation to expand the public community college system, and the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* expanded access to higher education for thousands of students.

The college-choice process in the 1940s and 1950s was relatively straightforward, with students

Prior to the 1950s, fewer than two of every 10 high school graduates went on to college.

making decisions from a defined and limited set of institutions. However, the increase in the college-going population forced colleges and universities to become more sophisticated and streamline their admissions and administrative practices. To create uniformity in the admissions process, member institutions of the College Board agreed to a common application date — an important first step toward the standardization of practices and policies across colleges and universities.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 fostered continued growth in college attendance in the 1960s, and by the end of the decade more than half of all high school graduates were accepted into college. With higher education participation rates increasing and a greater number of students attending two-year or regional colleges, an increasingly competitive environment emerged. Many four-year colleges and universities expanded their marketing efforts in an attempt to attract more students and achieve enrollment goals.

From the mid-1970s through the '80s, the college-choice process changed even further. It became more complex, began earlier in high school, and was marked by an increase of information available to families, much of it coming from the mass media. Additionally, a shift in focus regarding who benefits the most from higher education — the individual or society as a whole — directly affected public policy, institutional practices and students' college-choice decisions. Also, a decline in the number of high school graduates prompted colleges and universities to use more sophisticated business- and market-oriented techniques to recruit, enroll and retain students.

The 1990s saw significant increases in tuition and fees at public and private institutions and greater demand for financial aid. Students were considering more institutions earlier during high school, and they and their families actively looked

for the “best deal” for a college education. Colleges and universities responded by using financial aid strategies such as tuition discounting as well as early-admission and early-decision strategies to influence students' enrollment decisions. Savvy students and families continued to obtain information from more sources — including electronic technologies, college-ranking publications, specialized guidebooks and private college counselors. More students and their parents felt tremendous pressure to make the right decision and to make it as early as possible in order to get into “the right college.”

Factors such as changing demographics, public policy, institutional practices and marketing techniques all have had subtle but noteworthy effects on the college-choice process. The students of today begin the college-choice process much earlier than did the students of 1950. Although there is more information about postsecondary educational options, there is also more pressure on students to make the right decision.

The increased use of sophisticated marketing and communication strategies, combined with the greater reliance on loans rather than grants, has placed low-income and first-generation students at a comparative disadvantage to their more affluent classmates.

Market and competitive forces among colleges and universities have weakened the ability of organizations such as the College Board and the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) to broker cooperative policies and practices that could help students and institutions. Indeed, it is uncertain whether colleges, universities and admissions-related organizations will be able to help sort out these issues for the public good — and that uncertainty is troubling, given the potential impact of these developments on postsecondary equity, access and success.



Introduction

Increasingly, the enrollment decisions of recent high school graduates have become leading indicators for important societal and educational issues. For example, federal, state and institutional policy-makers often base their discussions about educational equity and access on the sociological and economic background of postsecondary students. At some highly selective institutions, admissions officers' jobs may depend in part on the quality and diversity of the entering class these officers recruit. Students and parents from upper-middle-class and upper-class families look carefully at college rankings to see which institutions attract the top students and win status as "America's best colleges." Recently, early-decision admissions programs at elite institutions have even been scrutinized by members of Congress. For many reasons, how students choose colleges and the factors that influence those choices have become important to many segments of American society.

In the 21st century, American families, as well as public and institutional policy-makers, believe that everyone in a modern society should obtain some form of postsecondary education and training. In the United States, a four-year college degree continues to be viewed as the most certain path to personal fulfillment and economic success. Numerous studies clearly demonstrate that

increased levels of postsecondary education lead to higher salaries, longer working lives, more career mobility and an increased quality of life (see, for example, Bowen, 1977; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

In their meta-analysis of individual rates of return on higher education, Leslie and Brinkman (1988), for example, conclude that college graduates earn from 12 percent to 15 percent more than the typical high school graduate when the average earnings of high school and college graduates of similar ability are compared. In addition, college graduates are less likely to be unemployed for long periods, less prone to miss work for prolonged periods of time because of health problems, and report being happier and more satisfied with life (Bowen, 1977). Although

Studies demonstrate that increased levels of postsecondary education lead to higher salaries, longer working lives, more career mobility and an increased quality of life.

economists frequently debate the nature and extent of the economic benefits of higher education to society and individuals, most assert that individual states, and the nation, benefit from a more educated citizenry (McGregor, 1994; Wellman, 1999). These benefits include: improved economic competitiveness, higher levels of productivity, enhanced government revenues and enhanced social equality.

The value of a large, college-educated citizenry, however, goes beyond financial benefits. After reviewing research on societal benefits stemming from increased levels of education,

Student enrollments are the lifeblood of colleges and universities, and student characteristics often define the distinctiveness of individual campuses.

Bowen (in 1977) and Pascarella and Terenzini (in 1991) concluded that college graduates are better citizens and that they are more likely to vote, assume civic leadership positions, use new technologies and support advanced education for their children and their communities. The research also showed that college graduates are less likely to be involved in criminal activities.

Public policy-makers can benefit from understanding how students' college-choice processes have evolved during the last half of the

20th century and how they are likely to change in the future. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which became known as the "GI Bill," and the National Defense Student Loan program (now known as the Federal Perkins Loan program) are good examples of how public policy-makers shaped the college decision-making process and why policy-makers should understand this phenomenon.

College and university policy-makers also have a vested interest in understanding how students choose a college. Student enrollments are the lifeblood of colleges and universities, and student characteristics often define the distinctiveness of individual campuses. The number of students enrolled accounts for 30 percent to 90 percent of all revenue. For historically black colleges or single-sex colleges, the ability to enroll a sufficient number of African-American students, women or men is critical to their distinctive missions. Church-related institutions also share this need to be able to reach prospective students with their distinctive missions. As competition for students intensifies and as the upward spiral of college costs continues, campus-based policy-makers should seek to understand the reasons that students choose their institutions.

In this monograph we examine how the college decision-making process for traditional-age students has evolved during the last half of the 20th century. We are especially interested in the topic of continuity and change in college choice. That is, in what ways have the decisions of recent high school graduates to attend a college or university changed in the past 50 years, and in what ways are these decisions the same? Certainly the characteristics of students making these decisions have changed over time. But how have societal concerns — as reflected in public policy and in the admissions and recruitment policies of colleges and universities — influenced the manner and timing of students' college-choice decisions? Also, how have these processes influenced the college destinations of high school graduates?

To examine these issues, we look at extant research, archival material and popular literature on college choice. We consider the influences of shifts in public policy in the areas of postsecondary access and equity and financial aid. We also look at changes and the evolution in marketing, recruitment, admissions and financial aid practices, as well as how other institutional practices have shaped the college decision-making process. Our primary focus is on how traditional-age students

and their parents have negotiated these important decisions between 1950 and 2000. We describe how high school students have confronted decisions regarding their postsecondary education — decisions for which they have had little practice or experience. After all, the college-choice process is one of the first major noncompulsory decisions made by American adolescents.

This monograph is organized in six sections. The first sets a context for examining the topic of student college choice, providing a brief historical sketch of what is known about the college decision-making process in the early part of the 20th century. Following this introduction, we move to the five major sections of the monograph. Each section includes three areas of focus: 1) public policy, 2) institutional policies and practices, and 3) students and families. The evolution of developments in public policy, institutional practices and the structure and substance of student college choice are not linear or coordinated, so decisions about how to distinguish among major trends are somewhat arbitrary. However, after we considered key developments such as the GI Bill, declines in the number of traditional-age high school students during the 1980s and early 1990s, and increased access to student loans during the 1990s, we elected to divide the time periods as follows: before World War II, the 1940s and 1950s, the 1960s to mid-1970s, the mid-1970s through the

1980s, and the 1990s. As we look at these time periods, we attempt to shed light on the following research questions:

1. What factors have shaped changes in the decision-making process?
 - a. How have shifts in public policy influenced the college-choice process?
 - b. To what extent have college policies and practices influenced the college-choice process?
 - c. Have other societal and educational changes altered the college choice process?
2. To what extent and how has the college decision-making process changed during the past 50 years?
3. What are the implications of changes in student college choice for public policy-makers, for college and university policy-makers, for public school administrators, teachers and counselors, and for students and their families?

The final section of the monograph offers observations, conclusions and recommendations for public policy-makers and others involved with student college choice.



College choice before World War II: Setting the stage

Families in the early part of the 20th century recognized the value of an advanced education. Comfort (1925) and Halle (1928) observed that the college one attended had great bearing on one's future. During this time, the pressure to select the right college was great and, according to many, the importance of the decision could hardly be overestimated. "The choice of a college is vital. So many young people go to the wrong institution, not knowing that there are almost as many kinds of colleges as there are of individual character and needs" (Halle, 1928, p. 5). Yet experts debated the degree to which students and parents realized the complexities of the college-choice process (Comfort, 1925).

The importance of making a good college choice continued into the 1940s. For college-goers, who at this time were primarily the children of affluent families, college selection was considered the blueprint that helped determine the course of their adult lives. College was important in terms of establishing oneself in a particular career path. College was also seen as a place to meet a mate and select a life partner; this was especially true for young women in this period. As Castle indicates, "choosing a college is one of the three great choices of a woman's life, exceeded in

importance only by choosing a husband and choosing a career" (1938, p. 68). Perhaps the choice of a college was deemed so important because of the lasting impact that the choice was thought to have on a student. "The freshman really marries into a great family with which he will always associate, whose gods will be his gods and whose ideals will be his ideals" (Comfort, 1925, p. 3). Consequently, choosing a college was not only about selecting where one would spend four years; it was about selecting one's life path.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the essential factors students were urged to consider during the college-choice process included: curricular offerings of the college, geographical location, coeducation, size of the college, type of institution (college or university, public or private, urban or rural), size of the college endowment, campus climate and the religious atmosphere on campus (Comfort, 1925; Ripperger, 1933).

As early as the 1920s, it was argued that one's future plans and the expense of the college should also be included as important factors (Halle, 1928; Tunis, 1939). Topics such as working one's way through school, fellowships, scholarships and loan programs were also prevalent in the literature of the time (Comfort, 1925; Halle, 1928).

As more students attended college, societal familiarity with higher education increased (by the mid-1940s, more than 2 million students were enrolled in more than 1,800 institutions). Yet students and their parents continued to make what many educators thought to be ill-considered, poor choices (Comfort, 1925; Fowler, 1946; Tunis, 1939; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). For example, Tunis wrote:

Boys and girls and their parents too often choose an educational institution for strange reasons: because it has lots of outdoor life; a good football team; a lovely campus; because the president or the dean or some professor is such a nice man (1939, p. 7).

This point is further illustrated in a study completed at Eastern Illinois State Teachers College in 1938 (Reinhardt, 1938). Researchers found that, among the 359 freshmen completing a survey on college decision-making, the most important factor in college choice was the influence of people, especially relatives. Thirty percent of the class of 1934 reported that a relative had the greatest impact on their college choice, and, for the class of 1935, this percentage was even a bit higher. Cost ranked just below the influence of others, with 24 percent of the 1934 freshmen and 22 percent of 1935 freshmen citing low cost as the single most important factor in selecting Eastern Illinois State Teachers College (Reinhardt, 1938). Similar studies conducted with freshmen in the 1930s found that an institution's proximity to a student's home had a strong influence on college choice (Corey, 1936; Reeves, 1932). Family and geographical proximity were sources of influence cited most often, and this fact led researchers to conclude that students' college-choice processes were unsophisticated. Corey (1936) stated:

One is impressed, after even a cursory survey of the reasons given by these freshmen electing to matriculate in the University of Nebraska rather than some other institution of higher

learning, with their navieté. There was little indication of careful, intelligent appraisal of the opportunities and facilities provided by available, similar institutions (p. 211).

To explain the prevalence of this unsophisticated method, some researchers pointed to the dearth of resources available to aid the decision-making process. Corey (1936) hypothesized that information was unavailable to make good comparisons of college opportunities and institutions. For example, in 1940 there was no clearinghouse or central educational bureau to inform students about the vast number of colleges and universities. This left students and parents to rely on institutionally produced promotional brochures, pictures and catalogues of varying quality — material that offered little in terms of comparable information (Tunis, 1939).

In the 1930s students appeared to make choices that were determined by vague notions of college reputation, facilities and personal values. Holland (1958) notes that, in general, students had little interest in doing extensive research on the colleges and universities they were considering, and seemed comfortable relying on vague information or general ideas when making their decision. In addition, the societal norms and values of the times further constrained the college-choice process for many students. As Lovejoy and Lobsenz (1954) wrote: "Many Southern colleges still bar Negroes; and many colleges throughout the country have quotas for other minorities, such as students of Jewish and Catholic faiths" (p. 106). Students' choices were further limited by discriminatory beliefs about gender, ethnicity or religion.

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The 1940s and 1950s: Shifts in thought on who should attend college

Prior to 1940, relatively few Americans believed that a college education should be available to anyone who wanted it and was willing to put in the effort necessary to earn a

The students in college in the early 1940s were predominantly male, overwhelmingly white, and from middle- and upper-class families.

degree. College education was reserved for an elite, socially homogeneous group of students (Bloomgarden, 1961). The students in college in the early 1940s were predominantly male, overwhelmingly white, and from middle- and upper-class families (Rudolph, 1990). Because higher education was primarily funded through student tuition and with only minimal aid available to students in the form of scholarships, fellowships and state government funds, college was primarily

affordable only to the middle and upper class. Although there was little federal support for

higher education, some low-income students received financial assistance from their colleges and through an early form of aid offered by the National Youth Administration program (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). For the most part, the “ivory tower” of higher education discriminated against African-Americans, women and the poor (Bonner, 1986). As a result, college was reserved for a limited population of students, and these students continued to follow the patterns of choice that prevailed in the previous decade.

The nation’s entry into World War II increased college costs and reduced college enrollments. However, when the American veterans returned home, the nation’s colleges became largely responsible for their reintegration into society. Financial incentives such as the GI Bill did exactly what they were designed to do: reduce postwar unemployment among returning veterans, boost college enrollments and expand access to postsecondary education (Babbidge & Rosenzweig, 1962; Lucas, 1994; Rudolph, 1990). The college benefits to veterans were generous — free tuition, college credit for wartime experience, books, fees and monthly allowances — all provided by the government (Bonner, 1986; Lucas, 1994; Rudolph, 1990). The wits and resourcefulness shown by

American service personnel in wartime suggested the tremendous reservoir of potential college students in the U.S. population (Bowles, 1967; Hilger, 1957). The GI Bill and other initiatives such as the National Defense Education Act expanded access to college and set off a boom in enrollments.

After World War II, American colleges and universities built and expanded at unprecedented rates (Lucas, 1994). By 1947 approximately 2.3 million students were enrolled, almost evenly divided between public and private institutions, in the more than 1,800 two- and four-year institutions (see Tables 1 and 3, Pages 50 and 52). About the same time that the GI Bill was enacted to provide funding to students who were veterans, the United Negro College Fund initiated its first cooperative fund-raising efforts to support historically black private colleges and universities (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). These efforts increased enrollments significantly at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which already were serving more than 90 percent of African-American students (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). However, in 1954, the landmark desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education* helped create more opportunities for African-Americans to attend previously segregated white institutions, ushering in changes that significantly and permanently altered the composition of the student body in higher education.

The postwar boom made huge demands on institutions of higher education. Housing veterans — many with families — presented a new and significant challenge. Quonset huts were quickly assembled on many campuses to meet the needs of these new students. On the positive side, the success of veterans, most of whom were nontraditional-age students, shifted public thinking about who should go to college and raised questions about equity and access to postsecondary education. In 1947, a special commission empaneled by President Truman to study the needs of higher education called for innovative peacetime programs to help college students and expand

educational opportunities to the masses (Bonner, 1986). The commission's report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, "directed that all barriers to educational opportunity be abolished immediately." To attain this goal, the commission proposed that enrollments double within the decade. Community colleges were central to the commission's plans for expanding educational opportunity (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Brint & Karabel, 1989). These local institutions emphasized associate degree and certificate programs and provided an alternative route into four-year colleges and universities. Municipal colleges and universities located in urban areas grew in response to increased public demand for diversified college courses, direct service to industrial areas, and adult education. As a result, most colleges and universities served populations in their regions and were not highly selective.

Expanded access ushers in policy and procedure for recruitment and admission

Expansion of the college-going population contributed to administrative and procedural changes on college campuses. Because of developments in professional associations such as the College Board, along with the emergence of federal financial aid programs and the increase in numbers of college students, admissions offices expanded and were further professionalized. In addition, the first financial aid offices emerged. Just prior to World War II, institutions of higher education were widely divergent with regard to admissions requirements, wording of applications and forms, application dates and correspondence with candidates. In short, what was true for one college or university in terms of admissions procedures was likely not valid for others.

The College Board, established in 1900, was first organized "to help high school students make a successful transition to higher education" (College Board, 2002). According to Bowles (1967), the primary role of the College Board between 1900 and 1948 was to administer college entrance examinations on behalf of its member

schools. During this time of expanded access, the College Board reoriented and broadened its mission to support college-going rates and reduce barriers to access. A member of the College Board stated that “very few college applications are sophisticated about business correspondence” and the mechanics of admission were more “bewildering” and “discouraging to a candidate from a small

During this period of rising enrollment, institutions also faced the challenge of dealing with students who submitted multiple applications.

country high school in the Midwest than to an applicant graduating from one of the Northeastern preparatory schools, even though both may be applying to the same university” (Bowles, 1967, p. 53). The publication of the *College Handbook* in 1941 was one approach employed by the College Board to help guide prospective students.

During this time, the College Board believed colleges faced three major problems in

recruiting students. The first was the difficulty in identifying potentially college-qualified students early enough in their academic careers to give them incentives to prepare for college and apply for admission. The second was the complexity of the “machinery” of admissions. The third was the weakness of school-to-college articulation systems, the systems by which colleges communicated their admissions standards and their expectations in terms of high school preparation (College Board Annual Meeting, 1951). Because secondary schools still expected no more than 20 percent of high school graduates to enroll in college, they failed to adapt their curricula to changes in patterns of college admissions and increasing demands for specific pre-college academic preparation.

Although discussions of the relationship between secondary school subjects and college curricula were under way (and would re-emerge later), some institutions decided that aptitude measurements were a more reliable way to measure a student’s preparation for college than was the establishment of a common core of courses (Bowles, 1967). In other instances, experienced admissions officers thought that other factors — character, motivation, personal habits, environment, etc. — should be considered when evaluating a college prospect (Fuess, 1967).

The College Board’s Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was the first nationwide college-entrance testing program. Although the SAT was first introduced in 1901 (as the Scholastic Achievement Test), its use was limited to colleges in the Northeast. The first national SAT examination was administered in 1926 to more than 8,000 students (Lawrence, Rigol, VanEssen, & Jackson, 2002). Many of these students were the best and brightest, those headed to the nation’s elite institutions. Other students often were admitted based on other criteria, including family ties or entrance exams offered by individual institutions. Following the accepted use of standardized aptitude tests to identify officer candidates during World War II, the SAT became much more widely used as a way to evaluate college applicants. In 1959, the American College Testing (ACT) program was founded, the test having evolved from the Iowa Test of Educational Development at the University of Iowa. ACT was founded to help a wider array of students make better decisions about a more diverse group of colleges and to provide additional information to colleges to help them accurately place students in the right courses (About ACT, 2001).

During this period of rising enrollment, institutions also faced the challenge of dealing with students who submitted multiple applications. The College Board referred to this as a “terrible nuisance” that created problems in smoothing out the administration of admissions. Responding to the “multiple application problem,” colleges and

universities imposed application fees to dissuade “casual shoppers” and help focus their applicant pools. College admission counselors started to seek out the most qualified students and increased the number and geographic range of their high school visits. The Advanced Placement (AP) program, which was first introduced in 1955, helped identify talented students. The AP program was credited with increasing student engagement in secondary schools and indirectly raising college admission standards. By offering bright students opportunities in high school, it reduced the growing number of bright students who chose to complete high school early to attend college.

With the launch of Sputnik in 1957, competition with the Soviet Union sparked a major shift in federal policy toward higher education (Babbidge & Rosenzweig, 1962). As the United States struggled to recapture the lead in the space race, the federal government pressured all levels of education to strengthen the science and technology talent pool. The AP program’s classes and tests were emphasized as a way to enhance education and better prepare students for college-level work in science. Also, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) offered institutions of higher education opportunities for additional funding for research and for student scholarships (Bowles, 1967; Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). The NDEA was enacted to induce students to consider defense-related majors (i.e., science, mathematics, foreign language), to provide student loans, to fund graduate fellowships and to subsidize university-based teacher-training programs (Bowles, 1967).

Although the earliest financial aid office set up outside the clerk’s or bursar’s office was established at Smith College in 1933 (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998), colleges and universities did little to administer grants or scholarships until the passage of the GI Bill in 1944 and the NDEA in 1958. Combined, these two new forms of aid required separate administrative services. In addition, the development of a formal needs analysis process to estimate a family’s ability to pay for a college education furthered the creation of campus

financial aid offices to process and administer scholarships and aid (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998). These policies opened the doors of higher education to many able students who previously had abandoned their college plans, officially wed the government and higher education, and flooded universities with federal funds.

Prior to the enrollment boom after World War II, it was common for an admissions office to have few personnel; many offices consisted of one staff member and one secretary (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998, Swann & Henderson, 1998). However, by 1949, admissions officers were prevalent enough that the American Association of Collegiate Registrars added “and Admissions Officers” to its official name (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2002). Some admissions officers had already been meeting on their own since 1937 in a group now known as the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The process of bringing admissions professionals together on a regular basis to discuss policy and procedures, combined with the College Board’s efforts, helped formalize the entire college admissions process. By the mid-1950s, college entrance requirements had created a fairly uniform prescription for admissions, which included a high school diploma, a minimum number of high school classes in certain subjects, high school rank, recommendations, personal interviews, and aptitude and achievement test scores (Beale, 1970).

The College Board played an active role in helping colleges and universities expand or become more selective. During the 1950s, the College Board began serving as a liaison between colleges and universities and students by asking potential students to list the institutions they were most interested in attending. The College Board

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provided colleges and universities with vital student information: aptitude and achievement scores, gender, race, ethnicity, type of high school, geographic location and class rank. As a result, information that the College Board provided to institutions, coupled with visits by admissions staff members to the College Board's regional offices, helped institutions focus and shape their applicant pools. This development allowed representatives from some colleges and universities to act as "gatekeepers" who selected the most qualified students for their institutions.

In the late 1940s, the College Board experimented with requiring students to rank their top college choices when they registered for the SAT. However, the practice was discontinued by 1951, making it somewhat more difficult for schools to

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narrow their applicant pools. During the 1950s, College Board regulations *required* member institutions to use the SAT as a part of the admissions process. This requirement, coupled with changing attitudes from colleges and universities about the increased use of general-aptitude tests after World War II, helped funnel a

large number of applicants through college and university applications processes. According to Duffy and Goldberg (1998), this early form of institutional selectivity — the ratio of applicants to admitted students — emerged as a sign of collegiate quality.

College choice for students and families: Steady and low-key

Much of the literature on college choice in the 1940s and 1950s mirrored that of previous periods. This literature emphasized the importance of the college decision-making process, and family involvement in that process was emphasized:

The proper choice of a college is one of the most critical jobs a family faces. ... You are helping to select the environment which is going to shape his career, produce his friends and maybe wife or husband, and condition his outlook and future way of life (Lovejoy & Lobsenz, 1954, p. 48).

However, as students and families progressed through the process, the primary role in college selection was thought to shift at some point from parent to student. "The wise parent helps his child to find out about college, offers his advice and then keeps quiet. Unless the youngster makes the final decision himself, he will never really be happy in his college life" (Lovejoy & Lobsenz, 1954, p. 107).

In a study conducted with 814 high-ability high school students, Holland (1958; 1959) noted the complexity of the college-choice process and showed that different kinds of students select different kinds of institutions. "Like many personal decisions, the choice patterns found here are probably not readily amenable to change because they are grounded in cultural and personal development" (Holland, 1959, p. 26). According to Holland's study, students' decisions emerged from the interaction of several factors, including student and parental interests, attitude, educational background, gender and socioeconomic status.

In the 1950s, much attention was devoted to the topic of coeducation. It was often argued that selection of a single-sex institution allowed students to focus more fully on academic achievement, while a coeducational experience fostered social and personal relationships (Dunsmoor & Davis, 1951; Lovejoy & Lobsenz, 1954). Some educators argued that, "If you are a girl and want to get married, your best bet is a coeducational college" and further suggested "... Cupid tends to avoid women's colleges" (Lovejoy, 1950, p. 95).

The factors influencing college choice differed somewhat by student gender. Holland (1958) found that the most influential factor for both men and women in the selection of an institution was

that it was considered to be a “good college” (53 percent of men and 47 percent of women provided this explanation). Among women, academic reputation was deemed the next most important factor in college selection (29.3 percent of women provided this explanation). For men, the second most important factor was proximity to home (18 percent).

Students learned about colleges from relatives, friends, campus-produced publications and by word-of-mouth. Contact between colleges and universities and prospective students during the 1950s was primarily through letters and campus visits. It was common for college representatives to send letters of encouragement to candidates with outstanding scholastic records and other qualifications. Colleges also sent letters encouraging students to visit campus along with the final application (“Freshman admissions forms and letters: A collection of specimens from twelve colleges,” 1954).

Lovejoy and Lobsenz (1954) recommended that the college-choice process begin no later than a student’s junior year in high school. Research conducted by Lipsett and Smith (1952) at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)¹, and by Moser (1955) at various Texas colleges and universities, provides additional insight into the timing of college decision-making during this period. In a retrospective study of the timing of students’ decisions to attend college, Lipsett and Smith (1952) found that approximately 60 percent of students had made a decision to attend college before their sophomore year in high school. However, more than 54 percent of the students surveyed indicated that they did not decide on a specific college until their senior year or later. In a similar study of students enrolled at RIT, Moser (1955) found that approximately 85 percent of the students decided to attend the institution during their senior year in high school or later.

During this same period, there were concerns about the “haphazard methods of schools and colleges in handling candidates” (College Board Annual Meeting, 1951). For example, students who

applied to multiple institutions would not learn of their acceptance until after the end of their senior year. To address this situation, the College Board sought to help member colleges simplify the mechanics of admissions by pushing its exam dates back to March or April.

This gave candidates maximum opportunity to receive and consider all acceptances before choosing a college. In addition, in an effort to give applicants time to consider all of their options, institutions adopted a common date by which admitted students had to notify colleges of their intent to enroll. The first date set was June 15, 1948. Eight member colleges of

the College Board agreed to this date, which became known as the “Candidate Reply Date.” This was an important first step toward unification of admission practices.

Finally, high school guidance counselors played a small role in the college-choice process during this period, generally focusing their efforts on vocational counseling rather than college counseling. In fact, discussion of guidance counselors often included warnings of counselors who were ill prepared, ineffective or blatantly wrong in their advice (Fowler, 1946; Holland, 1959; Wise, 1958).

Summary: The 1940s to the 1950s

Unparalleled expansion and the beginnings of increased opportunity characterized the context of higher education in the 1940s and ‘50s. As secondary education produced more graduates, and more college-qualified graduates, colleges and universities were compelled to meet demand. The GI Bill and other federal initiatives such as the National Defense Education Act altered the college-going population and firmly established

High school guidance counselors played a small role in the college-choice process during this period.

higher education's significance as a public policy issue. Colleges and universities were concerned with accommodating the surge of students. In response to the "tidal wave" of students, admissions officers often served as "gatekeepers," dissuading casual shoppers and focusing on the kinds of students that their universities wished to attract. There was a dearth of published guides and information for students prior to this time, but that changed, thanks to a variety of recruitment materials produced by colleges and universities and by the College Board.

The emergence of standardized testing helped expand the role of the College Board as a coordinating agency for higher education, which had an impact on institutions of higher education and on students and families. In addition, a role emerged for organizations such as the College Board and the National Association for College Admission Counseling. These organizations helped regulate and coordinate secondary

education requirements, helped to simplify the mechanics of admissions and helped to standardize college admissions. Likewise, the role of admissions officers grew and was formally recognized by their inclusion in professional organizations.

During this period of expansion, many institutions of higher education struggled with the choice to increase enrollments or become more selective. Students and their families increasingly concerned themselves with making a good choice. Students tended to make their college choices in their senior year or later. Parents were viewed as a source of support and influence and played roles similar to those they played in previous decades, but high school guidance counselors had little involvement in the student's choice processes. Although expansion and growth characterized this period in college choice, higher education remained primarily a choice for those fortunate enough to afford it.



The 1960s and mid-1970s: Legislative action influences college admissions

At the beginning of the 1960s, colleges and universities were still benefiting from the postwar faith in higher education (Bonner, 1986). While in 1945 only 15 percent to 20 percent of high school students went on to college (Tyack, 1974), by 1960 about 40 percent of all graduating seniors were being accepted into colleges (Lucas, 1994). Due to the growth of public colleges — especially two-year campuses — and governmental legislation, enrollments continued to rise through the 1960s. In addition, private four-year colleges — the venue for half the students in college in the pre-World War II years — no longer enrolled the majority of students (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

The postwar “baby boom” added to the tidal wave in undergraduate student enrollment. Although the front edge of the “baby boom” generation did not turn 18 until 1964, this group, along with many high school graduates who chose college instead of going directly to work, greatly increased the student population in the 1960s. In 1966, partly in response to expansion in the college-going population, the College Board launched its College Level Examination Program (CLEP), which granted college academic credit based on exam performance. The program was

designed to help measure learning “no matter where it was acquired” and “would be aimed especially at working men and women, ethnic and racial minorities, the disadvantaged, and the military” (College Board, 1980, p. 11). A college degree was becoming widely viewed as the ticket to a white-collar job and a middle-class lifestyle. The rise in enrollments caused this period to be referred to as the “Golden Age” of American higher education (Jencks & Reisman, 1977).

The civil rights and women’s rights movements and the legislative reforms prompted by the War on Poverty campaign in the 1960s did still more to increase the number of women, minorities and low-income students in college (Gelb & Palley, 1982; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). During the ‘60s and early ‘70s, almost all men’s colleges and half of the women’s colleges became coeducational. For many private colleges beset by declining enrollments, coeducation was seen as a way to combat financial

During the ‘60s and early ‘70s, almost all men’s colleges and half of the women’s colleges became coeducational.

difficulties; also, many schools went coed in response to changing mores reflected in the women's movement. For some elite institutions, coeducation was seen as a way to increase enrollment without decreasing the quality of the student body (Patterson, 1968). The shift to coeducational institutions brought about obvious changes in institutions' recruiting patterns and increased competition for top students. These developments also raised vital questions about equity in educational opportunity — questions that affected public policy then and remain a persistent issue for colleges and universities.

Under the leadership of President Lyndon B. Johnson, the most comprehensive national legislation concerning higher education was enacted in the Higher Education Act (HEA) of

Under HEA and its amendments, students and institutions saw unprecedented growth in federal student financial aid.

1965 (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). The act stands as the first broad federal program of financial assistance to both public and private colleges — as well as to individual students, specifically disadvantaged students. The 1968 reauthorization of the act created the original TRIO programs — Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. These programs, funded under Title IV of the act, were

established to provide expanded educational opportunity for all Americans — regardless of racial or ethnic background or economic circumstances (Wolanin, 1996). Upward Bound is the oldest and largest (based on total funding) of the federal TRIO programs. Upward Bound projects provide extensive academic instruction as well as counseling, mentoring and college tours for students in ninth through 12th grade. This project helped influence student decisions to attend college and increased students' information about

colleges and the choice process. The federal programs created under President Johnson's "Great Society" plan have been credited with building a positive educational system for the entire nation (Wilson, 1970). HEA further enhanced diversity in the college student population first initiated by the GI Bill. Enrollment patterns changed as students of different race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographic regions were afforded greater access to colleges and universities.

Under HEA and its amendments, students and institutions saw unprecedented growth in federal student financial aid. The Education Opportunity Grants (later renamed Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant and then expanded and changed to Pell grant) provided tuition assistance for low-income students. According to Mumper (1997): "These grants were to be the first step in the process of insuring that all Americans had the financial resources to attend college" (p. 79). Federal financial assistance greatly increased minority student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities (Bonner, 1986; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Spearman, 1981; Wolanin & Gladieux, 1975) and enabled more students to enter and remain in the college of their choice.

During the early 1970s, the federal government's involvement in higher education increased. Affirmative action programs, which were designed to ensure equal treatment of women and minority groups, and Title IX of the 1972 Federal Education Amendments, which outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex, were set in place on college campuses (Miller, 1999). The *Adams v. Richardson* decision (480 F.2d 1159 [DC Cir. 1973]) enhanced equity in educational opportunity for students of color by mandating enforcement of desegregation and stipulating that states achieve a better mix of students, faculty and staff in public colleges and increase access and retention of minorities in higher education. The legal pressure to integrate institutions of higher education resulted in increased funding to historically black colleges, more financial aid to minority students, and subsequent rises in student enrollments (U.S.

Department of Education, 1972). African-American student enrollments increased more than threefold at predominantly white institutions and rose by a third at HBCUs (Allen, 1987; Lucas, 1994). Federal financial assistance programs and these legal circumstances increased traditionally underrepresented students' exposure to college, facilitated their enrollment via additional financial aid and expanded their choice of postsecondary options — as a result, enrollment of African-American college students nearly tripled between 1966 and the late 1970s (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

The increased involvement of the federal government in higher education also led to greater accountability and record keeping at universities (Miller, 1999). Admissions officers, registrars and financial aid directors found themselves responding to demands for accountability with regard to financial aid reporting. Further, the late 1960s and early '70s saw a growing disillusionment with higher education — as evidenced by student protests and increased campus activism (Lucas, 1994). Students involved in protests against the war in Vietnam were characterized as a new breed, more independent and socially aware. In response to concerns about student rights, the 1974 Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), also known as the Buckley Amendment, was established to protect students' privacy rights. This act, which required institutions to develop policies, increase record keeping and ensure confidentiality, further "professionalized" college admissions work.

Campus-based policies and practices: Open admission and increased competition

Between 1960 and 1970, universities saw marked growth in their undergraduate populations, from 3.6 million students in 1960 to 8 million in 1970. This boom in admissions engendered a more optimistic movement for the "open admissions" policies that were developing (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Willingham, 1970). Two-year colleges were urged to adopt an "open door" policy (admitting all high school graduates and otherwise-qualified students), and other four-year public colleges

followed suit (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1970; Doerman, 1978). Community colleges, which were already growing under the postwar expansionist policies to more than 1,000 campuses by 1970 (Bonner, 1986), and the expansion of public regional campuses led to growing competition for students, even with the growth in the proportions of high school graduates going to college. A downturn in the labor market for college graduates in the early 1970s helped boost student enrollments in vocational programs at community colleges, but increased competition among four-year colleges for the remaining students (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Competition increased especially among the less prestigious private colleges. With this

increased competition for students, many colleges and universities tried to bolster enrollments by admitting new types of students (including more minorities, nontraditional students and those less academically qualified).

Increased competition for students also pushed colleges and universities toward corporate-style marketing in the 1970s. Marketing strategies allowed some colleges to increase the geographic distribution of their students. Admissions officers began to play a larger role in "high school relations," that is, marketing, recruitment and public relations activities. Admissions offices increased their use of computers, automating and streamlining the admissions and data-intake processes (Swann & Henderson, 1998).

The "quasi-brokering" roles of testing agencies also increased (Litten, 1980), with the College Board, ACT and other organizations selling the names of prospective students. For example, the College Board created the Student Search Service (SSS) in 1970. The SSS allowed college and university representatives to identify their key

Enrollment of African-American college students nearly tripled between 1966 and the late 1970s.

characteristics for prospective students, and then the College Board matched these criteria against files of approximately 2 million high school juniors and seniors. Colleges were sent data files that helped them expand their recruiting efforts, broaden their geographic range and recruit

The guidance and recruitment processes of the 1970s stood in stark contrast to those of previous decades.

students from underrepresented populations (College Board, 1998; College Board Student Search Service [SSS], 1970). This service helped locate prospective students, and direct mail quickly became a fundamental way for colleges to recruit students (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998).

The College Board's efforts to promote SSS reflected the trend toward marketing in admissions. For example, the cover of one of the SSS promotional brochures featured the slogan, "Finding prospective students has never been easier!" During this time, institutions exchanged much advice about marketing through trade journals, special reports and various meetings of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC).

In addition, by the mid-1970s, economic hardships and predicted declines in the number of traditional-age college students raised concerns about decreased college enrollments. This, in turn, prompted an interest in understanding student retention, and suggested the need for a more sophisticated approach to student recruitment (Grabowski, 1981; Pascarella, 1981). For example, admissions officers learned that recruiting materials should be related to students' choices of major, that curriculum-specific information should be sent, and that editorial and graphic quality were important. They also learned to apply "targeted"

marketing techniques, making sure that materials sent to a prospective student matched that student's interests.

As federal financial aid shifted from grants to loans, concerns were raised about the impact of this shift on student enrollment, college choice and institutional financial assistance policies. As a result, a number of strategies were developed to understand and enhance student enrollments. These changes, along with new marketing techniques and a related focus on retaining students, formed the foundation for what would be called "enrollment management."

College choice for students and families: Complexities and variations

During this period, there was considerable variation in the college-choice process, thanks to increases in the number and type of students going on to college, and the expansion of college options. As more Americans came to view postsecondary education as important to individual and national prosperity and security, more parents aspired for their children to go on to college. In addition, increased competition for students and greater diversity in the college-going population fueled the desire for a better understanding of college choice. The college-choice process was examined with more depth and methodological complexity, and research suggested that the process was becoming more nuanced and varied.

The guidance and recruitment processes of the 1970s stood in stark contrast to those of previous decades. At the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, many parents and students still found the college-choice process mystifying. For example, prior to 1958, College Board scores were released only to guidance counselors and colleges. This practice gave counselors a great deal of power to influence student decision-making and left students and parents less informed. College guidance counselors used "characteristic leaflets" that provided a basic description of a college's freshman class — information that counselors used to judge whether students could meet the

admissions requirements. In the 1960s, about 100 colleges produced these leaflets, which were distributed only to high school counselors. High school guidance counselors also used the College Board's *College Handbook*. The 1961-1963 edition included a table that listed requirements for institutions, including AP credit options, application dates, test dates, and the adherence to the Candidate Reply Date (in 1961, this date was May 1). The *College Handbook* was organized by state and institutional descriptions, and it included descriptions of student life and other university characteristics as opposed to just degree offerings, deadlines and dates. In the 1960s, a poor college choice was often described as the result of "ignorance" or poor guidance on the part of the high school counselor.

In 1958, the College Board changed this policy and began releasing entrance scores to candidates (Bowles, 1967). This practice allowed applicants to better understand their chance of success in being accepted at a given college or the reason for rejection. The practice also gave students more authority in the college-choice process and reduced some of the influence of parents and counselors. Many colleges and universities agreed on a spring notification of admittance and a May 1 Candidate Reply Date (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998). These policies created regular recruiting cycles for colleges and standardized the admissions process for high school seniors. Admissions criteria also changed. In the 1960s, some colleges began paying more attention to personal data than was previously afforded to applications. Although standardized test scores remained important, weight was now given to personal, environmental and nonintellectual attributes during the selection process (Beale, 1970).

It was common during this period for students to be told that at least half of all college dropouts could be attributed to poor college choice. The vast majority of written material published in the 1960s on choosing a college advised parents and students to work together to make the best possible selection. One publication — aimed at

girls and their mothers — suggested that the best approach to college selection was the "three-party system." The system involved each of the three interested parties: parents, counselors and students. Each offered opinions, facts and feelings to help make the final decision on a college a sound one. If all three agreed and worked together toward the same goal, it was believed that the chances of choosing the best college were higher (Klein, 1969).

During the 1960s and '70s, several studies were conducted that shed additional light on the college-choice process. Kerr (1962) sampled more than 1,000 high school seniors in school systems throughout Iowa. These findings provide some insight into the timing of college decision-making during this period. A

majority of the students (almost 80 percent) decided prior to their senior year to pursue a college education, though more than 75 percent of those surveyed decided during their senior year which college to attend. Kerr's (1962) results are comparable to the findings of Lipsett, Smith (1952) and Moser (1955) in that the majority of all students make their decision regarding which college to attend during their senior year of high school. Parents were identified as the most important source of assistance, while only 8 percent of the students

indicated that high school guidance counselors were an important source of assistance.

Authors Wilson and Bucher (1961) reported on what they deemed flawed methods of college selection. Of the many methods they criticized, the first was that of "family exposure," defined as students' selecting a college because a relative had

Although standardized test scores remained important, weight was now given to personal, environmental and nonintellectual attributes.

enrolled there. These authors, as well as others, believed that students should not be afraid to investigate “unknown” colleges. Wilson and Bucher also advised students to carefully determine the factors that may directly influence their college-choice process. Other flawed methods cited included acquaintance exposure — meaning a friend had attended the institution — and social and economic pressures (Wilson & Bucher, 1961).

Although the 1970s are seen as a time when many students questioned the relevance of a college education, parents thought otherwise. Public opinion polls revealed that, while 90 percent of American parents wanted their children

Only about half of the high school graduates of the early 1970s actually pursued postsecondary education.

to go to college, and approximately 70 percent expected their children to enroll (McCaffrey & King, 1972), only about half of the high school graduates of the early 1970s actually pursued postsecondary education (McCaffrey & King, 1972). This number, however, amounted to more than 11 million students

enrolled in postsecondary education in 1976 (“Helpful hints for selecting a school or college,” 1977) compared with only about 6 million just 10 years earlier (see Table 2, Page 51).

The 1970s were a time when many students and their parents were struggling to make the best college selection possible. Raley (1972, as cited in Carrington & Sedlacek, 1975) identified four sets of factors that appeared to affect a student’s college choice: factors internal to the institutions, such as academic reputation and prestige; factors external to the institution, such as its location and proximity to home; human influences outside the students, such as encouragement from friends or counselors; and individual student factors, such as their personal and family finances. Similarly,

Holland and Richards (1965), along with Bowers and Pugh (1973), found that proximity to home was an important factor. Bowers and Pugh (1973) also identified cost as an important consideration, as well as the social life on the campuses students were considering. These researchers concluded that students and their parents attach differing levels of importance to specific factors when making a college selection. They reported that financial factors, proximity and academic reputations were all important to parents, while students placed emphasis on social and cultural items.

In a study done at the University of Northern Michigan, Stordahl (1970) found that women were more likely than their male peers to say they had been influenced by intellectual considerations in their college choices. Students who had graduated in the top half of their high school classes also said they were more heavily influenced by academics than did students who had graduated in the lower half. Stordahl also found that first-year students whose permanent residence was within 150 miles of the university were more strongly influenced by considerations of cost and location. Finally, students in this study reported that advice from friends, relatives and others had little to do with their decision to attend the University of Northern Michigan. Looking across these studies, it is evident that factors such as academic reputation and the social climate of the institution had a strong influence on discerning parents and students.

In an effort to more accurately define how students were choosing colleges, Lisack (1978) conducted a focused study that separately examined the plans of white and black students in Indiana (Lisack, 1978). Lisack discovered that parent or family financial support to pay for college was far more likely to be expected from white students than from students of color. Students of color also were more likely than their white peers to be unsure of how they would finance their education. When asked why they chose a particular school, the seniors responded that it “offers what I want to study” (24.2 percent).

The top four reasons for college selections, in order, were: proximity to home, cost of tuition, reputation or prestige of school, and size of school (Lisack, 1978).

Even though increasing numbers of students of color were enrolling in college during this period (see Table 4, Page 53), their college decision-making patterns are not well documented. Draper (1976) wrote that prior to this period, "black students who went to college did not really have to go to any great lengths to decide what colleges to attend and what they should consider in making choices. They simply chose from the black institutions" (p. 2). Starting in the 1960s, however, many institutions of higher education began actively recruiting students of color, so Draper tried to understand how African-American students made their college choices. He learned that the number of children in the family and the college attendance patterns of siblings had a bearing on the kinds of institutions students chose. The more children in the family, the more likely a student would attend an in-state institution. Additionally, more than 45 percent of African-American students surveyed reported that financial aid was an essential element of their college-choice processes. The vast majority of students in Draper's study reported that the recommendations of family members, friends, teachers and guidance counselors also were important. Draper found that, in African-American students' decisions about institutional type and location, a mother's level of education played a more significant role than that of the father.

Additional studies during this period revealed more of the complexities of the college-choice process. In 1976, ACT published a report regarding student choices that revealed two main points. The first was that "people are interested in colleges which are more expensive than they can afford" (Munday, 1976, p. 3). Munday further stated that the majority of students at all income levels attend low-cost institutions, suggesting that the relationship between cost and choice is less than one might expect. The researcher propheti-

cally observed, "College costs have the most significant impact on college attendance at the extremes of the income distribution" (Munday, 1976, p. 14). Wealthy students are more likely to attend expensive institutions, and low-income students are more likely to enroll at low-cost institutions. According to Munday, students make college selections based on two main indicators: educational development and family income.

The second major finding of the ACT report was that students tend to choose colleges where the current student population mirrors the student making the choice (Munday, 1976). In other words, students

attend colleges where the population seems to comprise individuals much like themselves. Mundel (1974) summarized the main factors that influence students' college choices. These include: (1) the students' own abilities, achievement, motivations and tastes; (2) costs of attending various institutions; and (3) family considerations such as income and parental education. Mundel found that college costs were an important factor, especially for lower-income students. A parent's educational level also played a significant role in a student's college choice.

In the mid-1970s, Lewis and Morrison (1975) completed a longitudinal study on college selection, the most detailed study of the process conducted during this time period. They attempted to better understand how students acquire information, how they combine information, how they form overall evaluations of schools, and what strategies students employ in applying to schools. The authors found that the greatest number of student requests for college information occurred in the fall of the senior year. The number of colleges that students were considering also peaked at this same time with the vast majority of

Starting in the 1960s, many institutions of higher education began actively recruiting students of color.

students eliminating schools from consideration in early January of their senior year.

When making evaluative decisions about institutions, students tended to look at specific attributes rather than overall evaluations, and evaluations were made both in an absolute sense ("School A is too large") and a relative sense ("I like the size of School C better than that of School A"). Lewis and Morrison found differences between white students' and African-American students' decision-making processes, and in the ways men and women made decisions. African-American students tended to consider and make requests from a larger set of institutions than did white students. Women, they found, started their selection process earlier than men and applied to more schools.

Summary: 1960 to the mid-1970s

As public colleges expanded and competed with private colleges for traditional students, marketing increased in importance for admissions programs. Colleges increasingly viewed high school counselors as crucial to their recruitment efforts. ACT, the College Board and NACAC played roles in encouraging institutions to provide more information and also extended the marketing abilities of admissions offices. Students and their families were concerned about making informed

choices about college. Although information was available to students, and most students knew before their sophomore year that they wanted to attend college, they often didn't decide to attend a specific college until the spring of their senior year.

The list of decision-making criteria expanded during this period from practicality and the advice of others to include factors such as cost, proximity to home and academic reputation. Before the Civil Rights Act, black students had few choices among colleges. However, as black students' opportunities expanded, researchers began documenting influences on their choice processes. Increased support from federal, state and institutional financial aid programs played a role in who could go to college and which types of institutions they could attend.

When more students from lower-income families decided to attend college, the role of cost and financial aid in their decision-making increased. Cost and financial aid also increased in importance as institutions competed for student enrollment, in part because new students brought desirable federal financial aid dollars with them. These trends drove attempts to better understand students' search and choice processes and eventually led to the development of the enrollment management field.



The mid-1970s through the 1980s: Competition and constrained resources

In 1975, more than 11 million students were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education at more than 2,700 institutions (see Tables 2 and 3, Pages 51 and 52). Because students had many choices among many types of institutions, the competition for students was fierce. This competition was also fueled by other factors: an anticipated drop in the number of traditional college-age students, the channeling of financial aid to individual students, increasing competition from proprietary schools, and rising tuition costs that increased interest in enrolling students who were able to pay (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998).

Although Pell grant funding doubled from \$2.4 billion to \$4.8 billion during the 1980s (*Trends in Student Aid*, 1996), the corresponding rise in tuition created a unique problem — the federal and state-supported grants were failing to keep pace with the rise in cost to students. This prompted increased borrowing from federal student loan programs (Hearn, 1993; McPherson, Shapiro & Winston, 1993), and this trend raised concerns about the effects of reliance on loans on low-income students' college opportunities (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Although financial aid policies were characterized as promoting access, they were criticized for failing to support choice or equity

(Hearn, 1993). The ability of middle- and low-income students to choose freely among colleges was clearly constrained by the escalating price tags at most institutions.

Another concern for many was a marked decline in educational performance, which prompted the National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, in which the commission called for "much-needed improvement" in elementary and secondary school systems and claimed that academic standards had declined at all educational levels. This report contributed to the mounting tension between proponents of college access and those who feared that expanded access would diminish the quality of a college education (Kerr, 1990). The report also led to calls for accountability at all levels of education.

Although financial aid policies were characterized as promoting access, they were criticized for failing to support choice or equity.

Assessment and accountability became important to higher education in the 1980s (Banta and Associates, 1993). Pressure from substantial budget cuts increased accountability, and widespread public acceptance of institutional rankings (Machung, 1988) helped raise the level of scrutiny placed on higher education (Ewell & Boyer, 1988). Questions about student outcomes coincided with

By the late 1970s, more colleges were using aggressive marketing strategies to fill their classrooms.

research documenting the widely accepted links between college experiences, student outcomes and theories regarding college choice (Jackson, 1978; Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). This literature was helpful in addressing concerns about student retention (e.g., Bean, 1990; Tinto, 1987) and financial and enrollment

policies (Hossler, Bean & Associates, 1990). The research also responded to calls for accountability and efficiency.

Still, trends toward non-selectivity in admissions continued, and debates about the quality in higher education increased. In 1955 over half of the 2,000 colleges and universities in the United States had some type of selective admissions policies in place. In 1985 fewer than 175 of the approximately 3,000 institutions were classified as selective (Lucas, 1994).

Competition prompts institutional marketing

Although student enrollments were fairly stable in the mid-1970s at most institutions, many colleges and universities increased their recruitment efforts in response to the predicted reduction in the number of traditional-age students. By the late 1970s, more colleges were using aggressive marketing strategies to fill their classrooms (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998). As the gap between the costs

of private and public colleges continued to grow, competition for students, especially the “best” students, intensified. All institutions reported an increase in recruitment activities (College Entrance Examination Board, 1980). Colleges increasingly relied on direct mail to recruit students — obtaining student names, characteristics and addresses from national testing agencies, scholarship programs and state and local agencies. According to the College Entrance Examination Board (1980), private four-year colleges relied on telephone calls to prospects (50 percent), while four-year publics used invitations for prospective students to visit campus (35 percent). Many colleges and universities moved away from basic direct mail letters to more professionally produced, glossy, specialized publications highlighting their respective institutions (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998). Thus, the college “view book” was born.

High school visits by college representatives were even more common than direct mail (78 percent reported “very frequent” visits). Other recruitment activities included advertising on educational television (3 percent), advertising in professional journals (3 percent), advertising on billboards (5 percent), advertising in high school papers (5 percent), and advertising on commercial radio or television (11 percent) (*Undergraduate Admissions*, 1980). By the mid-1980s, many colleges and universities had adopted these aggressive marketing strategies (College Board, 1980).

Admissions criteria during the late 1970s included the following: ACT or SAT test scores (required of all students at 48 percent of colleges and universities), letters of recommendation (46 percent of privates required and only 5 percent of publics), and personal essays for four-year privates (required at 84 percent) (*Undergraduate Admissions*, 1980).

During the 1970s, despite this increased emphasis on more corporate-like marketing initiatives, colleges and universities were sharply criticized for the poor quality of their communication with students. According to Lenning and Cooper (1978), “Information provided to students

by most postsecondary institutions is often incomplete, insufficiently detailed, not clearly presented, or presented at the wrong time" (p. 5). The authors found that more than half of prospective students might have changed their minds about college if they had received more complete information regarding potential costs and financial aid. In response to rising attrition rates among college students, loan default rates and public criticism, Congress added a student consumer information section to the Higher Education Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-482, Section 131). Although colleges may once have had a "one package fits all" mentality regarding their recruiting efforts, more systematic approaches were needed to assess the information needs of prospective students. These approaches included determining target populations, developing needs assessment surveys, using multiple data-collection methods, analyzing data, and interpreting and applying results (Lenning & Cooper, 1978).

However, marketing was not as pervasive as some observers suggested. By the late 1970s, only about 12 percent of all institutions (19 percent of four-year privates) conducted formal marketing studies (market segmentation, positioning, cost effectiveness of recruitment activities, communication efforts, etc.). Thirty-nine percent had conducted informal marketing studies, and 47 percent of institutions had not conducted marketing studies (*Undergraduate Admissions*, 1980). Nevertheless, in an effort to maintain levels of selectivity in admissions, marketing and recruiting were becoming necessary activities for many colleges (Duffy & Goldberg, p. 54). Not surprisingly, the size of admissions staff and the institutional resources allocated to recruiting, such as information technology to process and manage admissions data, increased to support these efforts (Swann & Henderson, 1998). From the perspective of college and university administrators, the stakes of college choice were rising exponentially.

During the 1970s and '80s, competition for students and institutional quality and diversity had become important issues for admissions officers as

well as enrollment services staff. Colleges and universities took a longer and closer look at nontraditional (adult) students and international students as means of increasing enrollment. A College Board survey found that colleges wanted to increase their recruitment efforts in order to attract more academically proficient students (67 percent), minorities and economically disadvantaged students (55 percent), adult and part-time students (48 percent), as well as athletes (58 percent), and students from out of state (*Undergraduate Admissions*, 1980).

During this period, colleges started using financial aid programs in a more deliberate manner in order to build a solid recruitment class. Financial aid was used aggressively as a tool to attract promising students.

Although one report suggested that colleges were somewhat reluctant to offer potential students estimates of possible financial aid awards (Lenning & Cooper, 1978), they did use various financial incentives to attract students to their institutions. These incentives included no-need scholarships (50 percent) and modified packages that were high in grant aid and lower in loans (33 percent) (*Undergraduate Admissions*, 1980). Need- and merit-based aid packages were crafted to try to increase the quantity and quality of the admitted pool. Although tuition outpaced inflation during this time period, private institutions in particular implemented "tuition-discounting" plans to attract the "best and brightest" students, taking advantage of the public perception that high tuition was necessary for a high-quality education.

Private institutions in particular implemented "tuition-discounting" plans to attract the "best and brightest" students.

The 1980s saw a growing use of business techniques, marketing research and more sophisticated enrollment forecasting models. This stronger businesslike orientation was reflected in a report by the College Board that included sections titled: "Market positioning studies direct our recruitment message," "Using volume projections for market analysis" and "Using phone-a-thons: A hotline to enhance your recruitment" (*The Admissions Strategist*, 1984). Swann and Henderson (1998) revealed that in the mid-1980s, 43 percent of institutions reported "very frequent" use of telephone calls when recruiting prospective students, up 7 percent from 1979. Various forms of advertising were more frequently used, including billboards (9 percent), commercial radio (20 percent), local newspapers (36 percent), magazines (10 percent), and promotional audio and visual products such as campus tours (20 percent). Many colleges and universities hired marketing and consulting firms to aid their recruiting efforts.

In the 1980s, colleges combined enrollment-managed admissions, financial aid, orientation,

*The "U.S. News"
college issue
ignited public
interest in media-
generated ratings
and rankings.*

retention and institutional research under one department in the hope of making the enrollment process more effective (Hossler, 1984, 1986; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983).

In 1983, *U.S. News & World Report* published its first set of college rankings. While rankings of colleges and

universities had been around since the early 1900s (primarily in the form of efforts to rank graduate programs [Webster, 1986]), *U.S. News'* college issue ignited public interest in media-generated ratings and rankings as a proxy for the relative quality of colleges.

College choice for students and parents: Major changes emerge

During this period, researchers developed two different types of models to help explain the many influences on students' decision-making processes. The first type, econometric models, predicted that a student would select a particular postsecondary institution if the perceived benefits of attendance outweighed the perceived benefits of non-attendance or attendance at another institution (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). The second type, sociological models, asserted that students' desire to attend college, or "college aspirations," were influenced by socioeconomic status, student academic ability, high school context, gender and the views of significant others. These factors help to explain some students' college-choice behaviors (Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). Econometric models (reflecting the influence of cost on students' decision-making) and sociological models (demonstrating the influence of interrelated factors influencing college aspirations) were combined in later studies to reflect a more comprehensive view of students' college choice.

By the late 1970s, many more students were being actively recruited by institutions of higher education; even parents were the target for some recruitment activity (Hoopes, 1976). As institutions started to increase their recruitment activities, parents and students were advised to resist marketing pressures. Further, students and parents also were advised that the stress associated with making college choices early and applying by mid-December was unnecessary, as many colleges had adequate room when classes began in the fall (Pope, 1973). Parents were counseled that, unless their students were applying to elite private colleges or selective flagship universities, there was no need to feel stressed about the application process because good students were likely to be admitted (Pope, 1973). But, because the decision to attend a particular institution was believed to have a lasting impact on a student's path in life, the stakes associated with this decision actually

increased the stress felt by both students and parents (Chapman, 1978).

In the late 1970s, students thought of themselves as consumers purchasing services from colleges (Chapman, 1978). Findings from a seven-state survey of more than 4,900 prospective students revealed that students demanded more specific information about college costs and financial aid. More than half of the students surveyed indicated that such information influenced their decision-making process (*Making it Count*, 1977). Low-income students were particularly sensitive to information related to cost. Spies (1978) found that many students were discouraged from applying to high-priced institutions because of financial concerns.

Once again, parents continued to exert influence on students' college choice, particularly during the early stages of the process, by setting restrictions on cost and proximity (Litten, 1983; Welki & Novratil, 1987). Researchers found that others — counselors, teachers, peers and college admissions officers — were influential at the point where students formed their particular "consideration sets" (the set of colleges they might want to attend), but were less influential when students were making final decisions (Chapman, 1981). Chapman also found that, in the early stages of their college search, students practiced a level of "self-selection" based on their assessment of aptitude combined with estimates of their prospects of admission. Kotler and Fox (1985) reported that students in the early stages of the college search sometimes formed images of schools based on limited information that strongly influenced the later stages of their selection process. However, students' decisions regarding which colleges to attend were ultimately based on specific information about the colleges' academic programs, tuition, cost, availability of financial aid, general academic reputation, distance from home, size and social atmosphere (Keller & McKewon, 1984; Stewart, et al., 1987; Chapman & Jackson, 1987).

Differences in college-choice patterns related to students' gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status were also beginning to emerge. Hanson and Litten (1982) found that women and men differed significantly in their college selection processes. The differences were primarily influenced by educational aspirations and were attributed to disparities in self-esteem or self-assessment. Women seemed more affected by parental influence, geographical location, finances and college environment than did men. Women, as compared with their male counterparts, were also more likely to apply for "early decision" and submit their applications earlier.

In the early stages of their college search, students practiced a level of "self-selection."

Well into the 1980s, the participation of African-American students in higher education rose and fell (Hossler, 1984), thus making it difficult to effectively assess trends in the influences on their college-choice process. The Supreme Court's 1978 ruling in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978), which permitted colleges and universities to take race into account as one among a number of factors in student admissions for the purpose of achieving diversity in the student body, increased public awareness of the importance of access for students of color. However, although the federal TRIO programs and Higher Education Act of 1965 expanded access to low-income students, and the *Bakke* ruling supported diversity in college enrollment, the participation rates of some subpopulations — specifically those of low socioeconomic status, at-risk, or either first-generation or students of color — remained low (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Additionally, the increasing complexity of the college environment continued to make it difficult for many first-generation students and students of color to

compete (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997). The continued reliance on the SAT to help make admissions and merit aid decisions, the emergence of private admissions counselors and financial-aid packaging practices put some at a disadvantage. The National College Counseling Project reported that there was a general lack of support for underprivileged students during the college-choice process, while support for the privileged was

Clearly, students' college-choice decisions are mediated by gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

overwhelming (Dalton, 1988). Despite these difficulties, the population of diverse students in America's colleges and universities grew during the 1980s. However, African-American students were less likely to apply to more selective institutions (Hearn, 1984) and more likely to be concerned about college cost and financial aid (Stewart et al., 1987).

Jackson (1982) and Ekstrom (1985) found that socioeconomic status (SES) had a greater impact on students' decisions to attend college than did their racial-ethnic status. Because low-SES students were less likely to have college-educated parents, as well as fewer contacts with other college-educated role models, they had fewer sources of information about colleges than did high-SES students (Litten, 1982; Tierney, 1980). Furthermore, high-SES students were more likely to apply to and attend selective schools and to be less concerned with college cost than were low-SES students (Hearn, 1984; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Clearly, students' college-choice decisions are mediated by gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Before the 1980s, the college-choice process typically began in the senior year of high school, but by the mid-1980s, important shifts were under way in the timing of the college search. Students

began to feel the pressure to start looking earlier at colleges they might attend. Ekstrom (1985) found that 41 percent of students decided to attend college as early as sixth grade and that, by ninth grade, 61 percent were certain about their decision to go to college. In a retrospective study of Michigan State University students, Stewart, et al. (1987), found that 80 percent of students had decided to attend college by the end of their junior year in high school. This research supports Jackson's (1982) conclusion that by the junior year, if not sooner, students have made the decision to attend college. On the other hand, Litten (1982) found that African-American students appeared to start their college-choice process considerably later than their white peers. Most of these findings were strikingly similar to the findings of previous decades.

However, many new factors were identified that appeared to directly influence the college decision-making process. Perhaps not surprising, taking college entrance exams is one of them. By this time, taking the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) had become a rite of passage for an increasingly large segment of high school students. Gilmour (1978) found that taking the PSAT in the junior year of high school was a trigger event for students. This event prompted students to begin developing lists of specific colleges to attend and sometimes hurried their decisions quite a bit. Between the end of the junior year and the first months of the senior year in high school, students narrowed their "consideration sets" to four schools or fewer. According to Stewart, et al. (1987), the majority of students (70 percent) made the decision to attend a specific institution (in this case, Michigan State University) sometime during their senior year. However, there is little information on how students of the 1980s actually made their final decisions. Some studies suggest that students alone made the decision (Cibik, 1982), while others identified a variety of influences on students' decision-making (Ebbberly, 1987; Gilmour, 1978).

In addition to starting earlier, the search for the right college became more intense, requiring

greater investments of time, money and energy. The increasing costs of higher education and the perceived relationships between college attendance and success in the labor market raised the stakes associated with college choice (Hossler, Bean and Associates, 1990; Litten, 1982).

Gilmour, et al. (1978), found that students increasingly consulted *Peterson's Guide* and other college guidebooks for information about colleges in their "consideration sets." Chapman (1981) clarified the influence of guidebooks, suggesting that students tended to use written material simply to confirm decisions they had already made. Campus visits and the review of campus publications also took on a greater role in choosing a college (Litten, 1982). In some high schools, guidance counselors were also sought out during the student's junior year. However, as Boyer's (1983) research on American high schools documented, counselors had such large caseloads that they had little time to talk to students about college and career choices or to even stay informed themselves. High student-counselor ratios, along with the changing job responsibilities of guidance counselors, reduced the influence of counselors in the college-choice process at most public high schools. Thus, the influence of counselors was often exclusive to private high schools or affluent public high schools.

At this time, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and parental education played important roles in students' college-choice processes (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). For example, Paulsen (1990) reported that African-American students tended to consult more sources of information than did white students.

The availability of financial aid was found to be a strong determinant of college-choice processes (Hossler, et al., 1989; Manski & Wise 1983). However, the effects of aid on students' choices were not uniform or consistent. Some authors found that receiving aid, rather than the amount offered, is what most influenced a student's choice (Jackson, 1978). Other research showed that simply providing financial aid to students was

not enough to influence their choice (St. John, 1990). It appeared as if the kind of financial aid (grants, loans or work-study) and the amount of aid offered — in conjunction with tuition costs — clearly influenced student choice (Manski & Wise, 1983; St. John, 1990). Further, Paulsen (1990) found that colleges became less attractive to students when expenses and distance from home increased, yet became more attractive when availability of aid increased.

The competition for the limited number of seats at prestigious colleges and universities increased through the 1980s. Competition was such that many students were denied admission by colleges that would have admitted them just a few years earlier (Diglio, 1988). The growing belief in the importance of attendance at specific colleges was one of the primary reasons for this competitive environment. Increases in applications for admission showed clearly that more students and families considered college essential. According to the College Board, applications to four-year institutions increased by 16 percent, on average, between 1980 and 1987, even though the number of 18-year-olds actually decreased during that period (Diglio, 1988; Dalton, 1988).

In order to understand expanding enrollments and the competitive environment of college choice, researchers began to expand the body of research and create theoretical models on student dropout and retention (see Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1975). In doing so, they increased information about the impact of the college experience on students, helped explain persistence, and suggested approaches to keep students enrolled. In the 1970s and 1980s, a related line of research also developed that explained a student's

The search for the right college became more intense, requiring greater investments of time, money and energy.

decision to attend college and the factors that influenced his or her institutional choice (Hossler, 1984). This trend toward additional research demonstrated the growing interest in the college-choice process and served as an indicator of the mounting pressure surrounding college decision-making.

Summary: The mid-1970s through the 1980s

The mid-1970s and 1980s saw diminished support for growth in federal grant aid and increased use of loans to students. Marketing efforts became more aggressive and widespread, and college admissions staffs grew to support additional recruitment efforts. Admissions officers looked to international, nontraditional and part-time student markets to meet enrollment targets, as they simultaneously worked to recruit more minorities and disadvantaged students. Financial aid became an important tool to build a class, and institutions crafted need-based and merit-based

packages to attract talented students. Colleges were challenged by fiscal constraints, and demands for accountability increased. This created a favorable environment for the publication of institutional rankings as a proxy for identifying quality among institutions of higher education. The widely publicized rankings played an increasing role in colleges' marketing efforts and in students' college-choice processes.

As a result of more sophisticated marketing and enrollment strategies employed by colleges and the increased significance attached to choosing the right college, college-choice processes became more complex. Several research models were developed to better understand these processes. Some students began to use private college counselors to help cope with the associated mounting pressures. For many students, especially those from more affluent families, the choice process began much earlier and required more time, money and energy.



The 1990s and beyond: Greater accountability and changing demographics

The trend toward greater scrutiny of higher education that began in the 1980s continued throughout the 1990s. Difficult relationships between state governments and higher education were strained further by economic pressures and concerns about the high cost of college (El Khawas, 1995; Gose, 1995). National reports called for the continued assessment and accountability of higher education, raising questions about the effectiveness of many colleges and universities (Education Commission of the States, 1995). This accountability movement emphasized the importance of making information about colleges and universities readily available to parents and students. Increased interest in rankings and concerns about the provision of remedial courses at many four-year public universities extended conversations regarding appropriate quality and outcomes assessment in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

During the 1990s, the student population continued to grow and diversify (see Tables 1 and 4, Pages 50 and 53). More nontraditional-age students and part-time students entered college (Hansen, 1998; Lucas, 1994), and women soon outnumbered men on American campuses

(Hansen, 1998; Harwarth, Maline & DeBra, 1997). Enrollment of African-American students rose, but the biggest gains in minority student enrollment were among Latino students (Lucas, 1994). Changing demographics had profound effects on colleges and universities. Enrollments held steady — or even increased — thanks to increases in the number of older students and part-time students and greater focus on the undergraduate degree (Keller, 2001).

During this period, admissions officers were forced to reconsider established affirmative-action policies in response to legal cases such as *Hopwood v. Texas*, 78 F.3d 932 (5th Cir.), cert. denied, 518 U.S. 1033 (1996). This case, which asserted that diversity does not provide a compelling interest for race-conscious decisions in student admissions, shifted the national climate in the 1990s, threatening the policies aimed at expanding access for underrepresented students (Bresler, 1996).

During the 1990s, the student population continued to grow and diversify.

Institutions affected by the *Hopwood* decision saw immediate declines in applications from students of all racial-ethnic groups (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1996), prompting many colleges and universities to consider alternative approaches to ensure a diverse student body. Furthermore, rulings by the United States Supreme Court on the University of Michigan affirmative-action cases (*Grutter v. Bollinger*³ and *Gratz v. Bollinger*⁴) were likely to produce judicial statements critically important to the future of

*Tuition-
discounting
strategies resulted
in a "high stakes"
situation for
colleges.*

higher education (Michaelson, 2003). Although the court upheld Michigan's raced-based admissions policies in the law school, it struck down racial admissions preferences at the undergraduate level (Levey, 2003). The court found diversity to be a compelling reason

for race to be considered in admissions but indicated that limits in time and scope were needed. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's statement that affirmative-action policies should not be needed in 25 years suggests that continued challenges to these policies are likely.

The mid-1990s saw declines in federal funds available to colleges and universities. The flow of public money to higher education receded in response to increasing claims on the government to fund K-12 education and healthcare. Declines in total grant aid and students' increased reliance on loans, coupled with a rise in the number of "independent students" (those whose parents don't help pay education expenses), shifted participation rates of some students, particularly those from low- and middle-income families (McPherson & Shapiro, 1993). As financial pressures on colleges increased, enrollment managers were expected to maximize the net tuition revenue generated by student enrollments ("net" after subtracting the

institutional financial aid needed to enroll them). To maximize net tuition revenue, colleges and universities must carefully coordinate their decisions on financial aid, marketing and admissions (St. John, 1998). Tuition-discounting strategies resulted in a "high stakes" situation for colleges, with the winners attracting desired quantities and qualities of students to their campuses.

Demographic shifts such as those seen during this period will continue to alter the face of the nation's college-going population. Keller (2001) concluded that rising geriatric and immigrant populations and increasing needs for employee retraining will result in a boom in adult education. Globalization and the growing technology market have looked to higher education to provide both training and retraining. In addition, continued expansion of student enrollment is expected, based on a predicted 26 percent increase in the number of high school graduates between 1996 and 2008 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1998).

Wider and deeper applicant pools may have some positive effects for colleges and universities. Not only will institutions be able to serve a larger and more diversified student body, they will also have the opportunity (similar to that in the 1950s) to make important decisions about institutional mission (i.e., grow with applicant pool or stay the same and become more focused and selective). However, population growth will not be universal or uniform, and it will affect some states more than others. In some states, colleges and universities will struggle to find enough seats for students, while other state institutions will compete for students to fill seats. For example, Arizona and Florida are anticipating increases of 57 percent and 51 percent, respectively, in the number of high school graduates between 1996 and 2008. Louisiana and West Virginia, however, expect the number of high school graduates to decline by 1 percent and 13 percent, respectively (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1998).

Increased marketing in a competitive environment

In the 1990s, postsecondary education options expanded significantly. Students could attend public or private four-year institutions, two-year institutions, for-profit institutions, proprietary, technical and vocational schools, or virtual universities offering only online courses. This array of options increased competition among colleges and universities for the attention of prospective students. During this period, the desire for colleges and universities to be considered the "best" intensified (Hossler, 1998). In trying to enroll the highest-quality students as early as possible, some colleges increased already aggressive marketing of "early admission" and "early decision" opportunities. Although research shows that most students pay little attention to college rankings in the college-choice process (McDonough, et al., 1998), institutions continued to lobby for high placements in resource and reputation rankings published by various media outlets, including *U.S. News & World Report's* "America's Best Colleges," *Money* magazine's "College Value Rankings," and *Yahoo's Internet Life's* "America's Most Wired Colleges."

Although institutional recruiting still included the staples of direct mail, visits to high schools, college fairs and campus visits, colleges and universities adopted more sophisticated marketing and recruiting strategies. New marketing media and techniques such as CD-ROMs, electronic mail distributions, permission marketing and the World Wide Web altered the way colleges and universities communicated with prospective students. Swann and Henderson (1998) stated that, in 1992, only 12 percent of institutions reported having online services and only 19 percent offered computer services. However, by 1996, about 75 percent of colleges in the United States were on the Web. There was also considerable growth in the use of electronic tools for enrollment management, including various Web services, geo-demographic databases and analytical techniques (*Enrollment Management Review*, 1999). Technol-

ogy also began to play a larger role in the delivery of higher education courses, degree programs and the recruitment of individual students to campuses via, Internet, e-mail, satellite and cable.

"Early admission" and "early decision" admissions options have been used since the 1970s (Avery, Fairbanks & Zeckhauser, 2003). However, these practices took on increased significance during this period. Early admission is a non-binding option that simply allows students to submit applications to a preferred institution and obtain a response earlier than the institution's regular response date. Early decision offers students the same early-admission decision but is instead a binding contract between the student and the institution that requires the student to enroll if accepted. These options have become the primary ways students increase their chances of admission to their first-choice institution. Although these options were originally designed to help students get into the colleges of their choice, they have become important

strategies for colleges that seek to increase their selectivity and yield among admitted students and to better control the size of their entering classes. As a result, many elite institutions of higher education have filled as much as 40 percent of their entering class with early applicants (Hawkings, 2003). Hawkings reported that in 2002, 25 percent of private colleges and universities offered early decision, compared with only 10 percent of public institutions.

During the 1990s, enrollment-management programs became a mixture of marketing, admissions, public relations, financial management, statistics, institutional research and enrollment projections. The enrollment-management model in place at most institutions of higher education united admissions and financial aid. However, many financial aid offices began using multivariate

By 1996, about 75 percent of colleges in the United States were on the Web.

analytical techniques to award non-need-based scholarships in order to help achieve enrollment objectives. The complexity of the relationship between admissions and financial aid is further illustrated in the settlement of the 1991 case between the Antitrust Division of the Department of Justice and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the eight member institutions of the Ivy League. This case, which alleged that these schools were unlawfully conspiring to offer tuition discounts to commonly admitted students, determined that institutions could participate in cooperative financial aid arrangements if they

Students in the 1990s applied to more colleges and universities than in previous decades.

agreed to practice need-blind admissions and provide full financial aid to meet the needs of their students (1993, *Antitrust Division of the Justice Department v. Ivy (League) Overlap Group*, Third Circuit Court of Appeals). This case was significant in regard to financial aid practice, but it also

demonstrated the complicated ways that institutions used financial assistance to meet enrollment objectives. During this period, many colleges worked to integrate their enrollment services, public relations, institutional advancement and alumni relations programs in order to market themselves to the public more effectively.

Changes in the student body and in the choice process of students

From the 1980s to the present, choosing a college became a more complex and “high stakes” process for students and families. Several factors contributed to this situation: wider implementation of early-decision admissions programs; growing acceptance of the economic and social benefits of a college degree (Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991); changes in the financial aid environment, and increased competi-

tion for space at the nation’s best colleges (Bronner, 1999). Though these developments made the college-choice process more stressful and intensive for students and families, they helped create a new admissions counseling industry geared toward helping students and families negotiate this difficult terrain.

The stress of choosing the best college increased in large part because of the growing number of high school graduates going on to postsecondary education. At the end of the 1990s, suburban high schools were sending up to 80 percent of their senior classes to colleges and universities, and 67 percent of all graduating seniors in the United States were applying to college (Abel, 2000). Similarly, the College Board reported that 1.22 million seniors in 1999 had taken the SAT I at some point in their high school careers, up from 1.17 million the previous year (Bronner, 1999). Of the students taking the SAT, 60 percent were women, 364,000 were potential first-generation college students, and more than one-third were minority students (College Board, 2001).

To increase their chances of getting into college, students in the 1990s applied to more colleges and universities than in previous decades (McDonough, 1997). Dey, Astin and Korn (1991) reported that three decades ago, 50 percent of all college aspirants submitted just one application, and only 8 percent filled out five or more. By 1990, 33 percent of prospective students filled out only one college application, and 37 percent filled out four or more. In addition, early-admission and early-decision options were used increasingly by institutions and students. Avery, Fairbanks and Zeckhauser (2001) reported that most early-decision applicants came from highly esteemed private high schools and were more prepared and knowledgeable about the process of applying to and getting into their first-choice college. Perceptions of the competitive nature of the process and the desire to deliver an impressive application forced most of these early applicants to begin the college-choice process at the beginning of the junior year.

Today, the amount of information about postsecondary education available to students can be overwhelming. Many potential applicants receive campus viewbooks and direct mail, listen to the anecdotal testimony of friends and families, and learn about potential colleges and universities through Web sites, college ranking guidebooks, videocassettes, DVDs and CD-ROMs. Today, numerous Web sites exist to offer suggestions on how students should choose a college, what things to consider, as well as how to prepare for the college experience (College Choice Web site, 2001).

The continued use of computer software and the Internet has increased students' access to information. For instance, students can use College Link to obtain applications for more than 700 institutions and apply online to far more institutions with ease (Kelleher, 1995). But the technology has not lessened the decision-making burden for students. Students continue to prepare for and take the SAT or ACT tests (sometimes twice or even more), visit many college campuses and sort through piles of mail from colleges. They also engage in new behaviors, such as conducting Internet searches, participating in video teleconferences and engaging in virtual tours. Improved access to information — especially for middle- and upper-income students — has forced students to wade through and evaluate more information about colleges than ever before.

A new private sector industry also emerged to help students gain admittance to the right college. McDonough (1994) writes, "an industry has grown up to help college-bound students: guidebooks, and software for SAT coaching; private counselors; consortia offering paid trips for high-school counselors to obscure college campuses; and slick magazines selling private college educations marketed to students stratified by SAT scores and socioeconomic status" (p. 427). Now students who can afford to do so hire private college counselors to help with the college-choice process. Private college counselors tend to provide some or all of the following: "(a) specialized knowledge or

assistance, (b) uninterrupted time with a counselor, (c) organization and management of the college-choice process, and (d) the cooling out of unreasonable aspirations with viable, personalized alternatives" (McDonough, Korn & Yamaski, 1997, p. 300). Another benefit of the private counselor is that parents can shift their role from "taskmaster" and "nag" to "coach" and "friend." This shift in parental roles is especially helpful to students during peak stress times between November and February (when application deadlines are imminent) and between March and May (when institutions make admission decisions) (Zucker, 1997).

Fees for private counseling vary, depending on the quantity of contact with the students; families can spend between \$500 and \$3,000, depending on students' needs (Gose, 2000). As both competition and costs have increased, many savvy parents believe a private counselor to be a sound investment. Although only 3 percent of college freshmen used private counselors, their presence illustrates the increasingly competitive environment of college choice (McDonough, Korn & Yamaski, 1997). As the role of private counselors has increased, the influence of high school guidance counselors in the college-choice process has declined (DeLany, 1991). At the same time, financial pressures faced by many public high schools have helped shift the counselor's role from adviser to scheduler and record keeper.

Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei (1996) stated that, at many public high schools, staff have left advising to students and parents, regardless of whether parents have adequate information (p. 267). This lack of guidance can have a detrimental effect on all students, but particularly students from low-income families, whose parents often lack the ability, time and insight to provide guidance on the college-choice process. The

Technology has not lessened the decision-making burden for students.

disparities in the college-choice process thus widen between affluent and low-income students.

The factors influencing students' college choice in the 1990s remained much the same as those identified in the 1960s by Holland and Richards (1965). They found that four main factors influenced students' college choice: intellectual

Students generally consider the largest number of institutions during the junior year.

emphasis, practicality, advice of others and social emphasis. Practicality included items such as "closeness to home" and "low cost," while items related to social climate and co-curricular life fit the social emphasis factor. Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999) found similar influences for

students, but they asserted that either parents, other family members, or, to a lesser extent, peers, had the greatest influence on students' decisions. These findings are consistent with research dating back to the 1930s and 1940s.

Nora and Cabrera (1992) found many determining variables that influenced college choice beginning as early as middle school. In Grades 7 through 9, parental encouragement, socioeconomic status, parental educational attainment, school experience and student ability influenced students' attitudes about going to college. Around the junior year and continuing through the senior year, educational and career aspirations, socioeconomic status, ability, parental encouragement, college attributes (i.e., quality, campus, academic programs, distance from home) and financial limitations are the factors that most influence students in their college-choice processes.

With regard to the timing of student decision-making, Hossler, et al. (1999), found that by the time students reached 10th grade, they had developed a short list of colleges and had defined a list of desirable characteristics for preferred colleges. In the junior year, students developed

slightly longer lists of colleges, but the types of institutions under consideration remained fairly constant. In the junior year, many students became more active in college information gathering and sought the advice of parents, family members, peers, teachers, guidance counselors and college admission officers. Also during the junior year, cost of attendance became an important factor in their search process. During the senior year, information gathering peaked, and students reduced the number of colleges in their "consideration sets." The influence of teachers, peers and counselors seemed to replace that of parents and other family members. The types of institutions that students considered remained relatively stable throughout the high school years. Students generally consider the largest number of institutions during the junior year, as this is often a time of exploration and uncertainty. Seniors, however, narrowed their choice set and became more certain of the institutional characteristics most important to them.

Other researchers also found that many students began gathering information about a specific set of colleges by the spring of their junior year. For example, Cummings, Hayek, Kinzie and Jacob (2000) found that students used local and familiar sources and experiences (e.g., colleges and universities that are close to home, colleges and universities family members have attended, colleges and universities that are favorite "teams" for family members) to identify colleges in their choice sets. The majority of high school juniors in this study had a preconceived notion of an "ideal" school. The characteristics of this ideal helped to direct their college search. For instance, students who had grown up in a family with a tradition of attending large state universities believed they would be most comfortable with this type of institution. By concentrating on a set of institutions as a unit of analysis, students refined their search by focusing on other variables, such as academic programs, varsity sports and location. Interestingly, students whose choices were restricted by financial considerations or a parental

request to stay in state began the college decision-making process much earlier than did their peers.

For college-bound juniors and seniors, the choice process required a significant time commitment. A study conducted in Indiana found that, for many students, the cumbersome process of choosing a consideration set, taking college entrance exams, writing application essays, sorting through mail, searching the Web, visiting campuses and applying to colleges was just another set of stressors to be dealt with as they juggled academic coursework, extracurricular activities and, for many, full- or part-time jobs (Cummings, Hayek & Kinzie, 1999). This predicament has become commonplace for many juniors and is even more intense for seniors.

A number of other factors also constrain students' consideration sets and final college-choice decisions by filtering college options through a lens of economic circumstances, academic achievement, personal values or future plans (Braxton, 1990; McDonough, 1997; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001). McDonough (1997) found that "the patterns of students' aspirations ... were shaped by the class context of the communities, families, and schools in which students lived their daily lives" (p. 151). This contrasts with the perspective that individual rather than community factors are crucial to the narrowing of the college-choice set (Braxton, 1990; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997). The data suggest that students are more likely to apply to and attend institutions away from home if they are male, if their parents have college degrees, if they are from at least a middle-income family, or if they are adequately prepared for the academic demands of college (Paulsen, 1990).

One cannot ignore the fact that students' academic abilities and socioeconomic status play a significant role in college decision-making activities (Hossler, et al., 1989; Kelp Kern, 2000; McDonough, 1997). Students of high academic ability are more likely to attend selective institutions as well as out-of-state institutions; conversely, lower-ability students are more likely to attend less

selective in-state institutions (Braxton, 1990). Heller (1997) found that low-income students appear to be more sensitive than middle- or upper-income students to rising college costs. This sensitivity constrains low-income students' consideration sets and their potential enrollment options, making them less likely to select private or four-year institutions. The strongest effects of background characteristics on educational attainment are due to social class, race and gender (McDonough, 1997; Terenzini et al., 2001).

According to McDonough (1997), "African-Americans, women, and low-SES students are especially likely to attend less-selective institutions even if their ability and achievements are high" (p. 5).

Race, income and parental education play important roles in who and what influences students in their college decision-making process (Kelp Kern, 2000; McDonough,

1997; Terenzini et al., 2001). For example, Paulsen (1990) reports that African-American students appear to consult a greater number of information sources than do white students, though they are less likely to rely solely on information from either family members or friends (Paulsen, 1990).

More recent studies also indicate that the types of factors and the magnitude of their influence may be different for African-American and white students (Bateman & Hossler, 1996; McDonough & Antonio, 1998). In looking at reasons why African-American students choose historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) over predominately white institutions, McDonough and Antonio (1998) found that geography, religion, an institution's social reputation and familial preference were strong factors in students' choice of HBCUs. Reasons for choosing predominately white colleges included athletic recruitment,

Race, income, and parental education play important roles in who and what influences students.

proximity to home and an institution's academic reputation (McDonough & Antonio, 1998).

Choosing an institution close to home is a way for many students to alleviate some of the burden of higher education's cost (Angel & Barrera, 1991; Terenzini, et al., 2001). By attending a college close to home, students have the option of living at home in order to avoid paying rent (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Griffith & Connor, 1994). For many community college students, attendance is more dependent on their personal lives, job lives, or the influence of the outside world than on anything specific to the college (Griffith & Connor, 1994). Additionally, attending a local community or four-year college might ensure that a student can avoid other costs and changes, such as finding a new place of employment, moving, or making friends (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Maxwell, 1992).

Because they may feel uncomfortable or "out of place" on college campuses, many first-generation students and students of color consider the institutional "environment" important to their college decision-making processes (Terenzini, et al., 1994). In some cases, community colleges are seen as viable choices simply because attendance will allow students to build the confidence to go

The availability of financial aid is an important factor in many students' college-choice processes.

on to another college or university (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Griffith & Connor, 1994).

The availability of financial aid is an important factor in many students' college-choice processes. Results from the Higher Education Research Institute survey

comparing freshmen attitudes toward college costs and financial aid showed that a growing percentage of first-year students report each year that they made college-choice decisions based on financial reasons (Geraghty, 1997). In 1996, 33 percent of

first-year students reported financial assistance as "very important" in selecting a college, while the number of freshmen who reported they had selected a college based on low tuition was 31 percent (Geraghty, 1997).

While the importance of financial aid was increasing, both the amounts and types of aid awarded were changing. By 1992, 52 percent of all federal aid (Campaigne & Hossler, 1998) was in the form of loans, and the trend of increasing loans continues. The percentage of undergraduate students at four-year colleges and universities borrowing from the federal government increased by 11 percent from 1992-93 to 1995-96 (NCES, 1998). For this group of students, the average loan amount held by an individual increased from \$3,000 to \$4,200. As a result, students and families incurred even more debt during the first part of the 1990s, in both current and constant dollars (Campaigne & Hossler, 1998).

Loans became both an extra benefit for middle- and upper-income students and a deterrent for low-income students, as the loans provided an unfortunate disincentive to enrollment (St. John, 1998). The vast majority of students indicate that the potential receipt of financial aid influences their college decision-making, and this influence is even greater on low-income students. In fact, despite the availability of financial aid, nearly half of high school seniors from the lowest socioeconomic group do not go on to college. This number is 20 percent higher than that of high school seniors from the highest socioeconomic group (Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001).

Social class shapes the educational attainment levels to which students aspire (Horvat, 1996; McDonough, 1994). Low-income students perceive that fewer opportunities are available to them and thus self-select not to pursue a college education (McDonough, 1997). The growing complexity of the college-choice process combined with the elimination of college advising in most public high schools denied many low-income students the information needed to make an appropriate, informed decision (McDonough &

Antonio, 1998). However, by 1998, federal TRIO programs provided assistance to 780,000 qualified students, almost all of them from minority or low-income backgrounds, including 16,000 individuals with disabilities (National Council of Educational Opportunity Associations, 1998). If not for TRIO, many of these students might have had inadequate academic preparation and support to attend college (Blake, 1998). As the college decision-making process becomes more sophisticated, TRIO programs help to demystify the choice process for a growing number of students. Ultimately, in an environment that is moving toward more computer-supported information sharing and requires families to gather, sort and analyze a growing volume of data, low-income students seem more disadvantaged than ever.

Summary: The 1990s and beyond

The 1990s were marked by a climate of accountability and the use of rankings to rate institutions of higher education. While institutions struggled with declining financial support from both federal and state governments, public institutions adopted businesslike behaviors to respond to their new fiscal realities. Tensions continued to mount as questions arose about whether increasing college access might somehow harm the quality of college education. Although changing demographics supported the continuing racial, ethnic and age diversification of student

bodies in the 1990s, threats to affirmative-action programs — and the diversity rationale in particular — presented new challenges to higher education. In an admissions environment characterized by student demands for timely and accurate information, colleges faced serious reductions of the funds needed to support their sophisticated marketing and recruiting campaigns. Institutions increased their efforts to win high rankings in various media outlets and employed new technology in their recruitment initiatives. Colleges' enrollment-management divisions integrated marketing, admissions, public relations, financial management, institutional research and enrollment projections. High school juniors and seniors who aspired to attend the best colleges started the college-choice process earlier and made decisions earlier — a process that for some students and families nearly amounted to a full-time job. The availability of financial aid remained an important factor in students' college-choice process. The combination of rising college prices and the increased need to rely on loans instead of grants significantly constrained the choice process for many low-income students.

TRIO programs help to demystify the choice process for a growing number of students.



Summary: 50 years of college choice

In this closing section we return to our original focus: how college-choice processes have changed over the past 50 years and how they have remained the same. We review the causes and implications of the continuity and change and then

Prior to the late 1940s, less than 20 percent of all high school graduates went on to college.

shift attention to the implications of our findings for the future.

Have developments in student access, admissions recruitment and marketing strategies and changing demographics altered the factors that students and their parents consider when making their decisions? Has the

timing of students' college-choice decisions changed? Do the factors students consider when they make decisions help us understand how students view the college-choice process and the pressures they experience as they move through this process? What do answers to these questions mean for future generations of high school students and their families?

Prior to the late 1940s, less than 20 percent of all high school graduates went on to college. Because most students going on to college came

from upper-middle-class and upper-class families, little emphasis was placed on college guidance; for many of these students, college attendance was simply assumed. With a dearth of popular guidance literature for students or parents, there was less competition for students and less focus on being accepted at a top school. Fewer women, students of color, or low-income students attended a college or university after high school, and college campuses were primarily the domain of middle- and upper-class white males.

However, in the 1940s, these circumstances began to change. Indeed, change became the dominant characteristic of college admissions and student college choice during the later half of the 20th century. Access to higher education became an important component of the public policy agenda.

Following the enactment of the GI Bill to pay for the education of millions of World War II veterans, the Truman Commission recommended the expansion of a public community college system throughout the United States, prompting the building of many such campuses. The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* then initiated the process of expanding access to higher education for students of color. Arguably, these developments may have done more to expand access and equity in the last 50 years than the federal and state financial aid initiatives

brought about by the Higher Education Act of 1965. These and other developments expanded access and started moving American higher education from an elite to an egalitarian system.

As more students pursued postsecondary education, colleges and universities began making admissions processes more systematic and efficient. The College Board and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) further standardized the college admissions process. In 1948, eight Ivy League institutions agreed to the common date of June 15 as the deadline for all students to apply to their respective campuses. In the early 1950s, NACAC began to establish an identity for admissions professionals separate from that of registrars, which is where most admissions professionals started their careers. The college admissions field was becoming a respectable profession, and more attention was being paid to the college-choice process. During the 1950s, the College Board began to publish admissions statistics. This important change signaled the beginning of the admissions marketing era, resulting in a more sophisticated college decision-making process. The selectivity of a college based on admitted applicants quickly became equated with college quality (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998).

For students in the 1940s and 1950s, the college-choice process was relatively straightforward. Continuity characterized the college decision-making process as students and parents made decisions from among a defined and narrow set of institutions. However, subtle shifts were under way. Parents had previously been the audience for most of the college-choice guidance literature and may have exerted more influence on the college-choice process than did the students themselves. By the early 1960s, however, more literature had been developed specifically for high school students. Parents started to become a secondary audience. The guidance literature also started to emphasize the role of the high school counselor, as counselors were charged with helping high school students make sound decisions.

During this same period, NACAC, ACT and the College Board served several important roles: They helped standardize and simplify many of the steps in the college admissions and recruitment process; they helped to broker policies that benefited students, families and institutions; and, in the case of the College Board and ACT, they provided tools and strategies to further accentuate the shift toward a marketing orientation for admissions offices.

Prior to the 1950s, the only studies done to assess reasons for students' college choices suggested that proximity to home and costs were the primary factors. In the 1950s, research demonstrated that colleges' academic reputations had become an important factor. Research also found that most students delayed their college choice until during or after their senior year

(Lipsett & Smith, 1952; Moser, 1955). Between 18 percent and 43 percent of students did not decide where to go to school until after they had graduated from high school. The research during this period indicates that few students considered that process as one involving "high stakes."

During the 1960s and 1970s, public policy-making continued to focus on expanding student access. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 set the stage for the continued growth in college attendance. By 1970, the proportion of high school students accepted to college had already reached 52 percent (Lucas, 1974). This period was marked by significant expansion of postsecondary educational opportunities for women, students of color and low-income students.

The increase in college participation rates, combined with the rising number of community colleges and the growth of regional public

For students in the 1940s and 1950s, the college-choice process was relatively straightforward.

institutions, caused many institutions to struggle to reach enrollment goals. The increased competition for students enhanced the focus on admissions marketing, and though only about 100 colleges in the early 1960s produced leaflets to send to high schools, there were clear signs of the growing focus toward marketing in the college-choice process.

By 1961, the candidate reply deadline had been moved up from June 15 to May 1. The College Board began publishing average SAT scores for all students attending each college and university, allowing students to compare their test scores and determine the likelihood of being admitted to certain colleges. In 1970, the College

During the 1960s and '70s, federal and state governments became more involved in the financial aid process.

Board created the Student Search Service, which made it possible for college admissions offices to purchase the names of students who had taken the SAT and possessed specific characteristics which made them desirable candidates for admission. The lists could be used to communicate with students by direct mail or other means. Once again, the role of

organizations such as the College Board in shaping the college-choice process is evident.

This period produced changes in students' admissions behavior. High school students gathered most of their college information during the senior year, narrowed the lists of colleges they actively considered and applied for admission in January, with the most important factors being: perceived quality or institutional prestige, cost and proximity to home.

During the 1960s and '70s, federal and state governments became more involved in the financial aid process for students, while public

policy-makers and college administrators became more interested in participation rates in higher education. Emphasis on college guidance at public high schools enhanced access, and colleges increased their efforts to provide more information about themselves to more high school students. While these developments enhanced access for a larger proportion of youth in the United States, they also made the college decision-making process more complex.

By the 1980s, emerging public and institutional policy developments affected students' college-choice processes. A shift in attitude occurred regarding who benefits most from higher education — the students (who attend and consequently are able to get better jobs and earn more money) or society (which benefits from an educated workforce and informed citizenry). The predominant view came to be the former one — that higher education is largely a personal or individual benefit. That view contributed to the use of more loans than grants in federal student aid programs. Studies on the influence of loans on students' college aspirations and choices revealed that loans often constrained the choices of low-income and first-generation students.

At this time, the declining numbers of high school graduates led to an even greater use of sophisticated marketing strategies and business-oriented techniques in college admissions offices, specifically: targeted direct mail; a move from letters to glossy, high-impact brochures; telemarketing, and an increased emphasis on admissions counselors making high school visits.

Many public policy-makers became concerned that colleges' marketing efforts had become so aggressive that the schools no longer accurately represented themselves to prospective students. So, in 1976, the bill to reauthorize the Higher Education Act included provisions on the accuracy of "consumer information" flowing to the public.

Starting in the 1980s, struggling private institutions expanded their enrollment-management programs. They began to use financial aid awards in a practice called tuition discounting to

help achieve desired enrollment levels. In 1983, *U.S. News & World Report* published its first "America's Best Colleges" issue, ushering in what now appears to have become a national obsession with college rankings. The accumulated impact of this period, with its focus on accountability and marketing and other public and institutional policy trends that started in the 1950s, significantly altered the student college-choice process. For institutions, students and families, more attention was being focused on the college-choice process — attention that raised the perceived stakes for all involved.

In the 1980s, increased study of the college-choice process indicated that students were starting the decision-making process earlier, and that college proximity and cost of attendance remained primary factors in students' choices. However, change was evident. High school students reported they'd started gathering information as early as their junior year, and an increasing number of students applied to colleges in the fall of their senior year, rather than waiting until January.

The increase in marketing by colleges made the "admissions game" more visible to prospective students and their families. The emphasis on college rankings in the popular media fueled student and parental beliefs that institutional status and college prestige had a great influence on personal success in later life. A small percentage of students and families provided a market for private college guidance services. These services targeted upper- and upper-middle-class students concerned about maintaining or enhancing the status of their families. These developments indicate that increasing societal and familial pressure was affecting students' college-choice decisions.

Throughout the 1990s and on to the present, public policy has moved toward privatization of higher education. The proportion of state funding going to public colleges has continued to decline and, consequently, tuition and fees continue to rise. The tuition and fees of private institutions also continue to rise, increasing the demand for

aid. Enrollment-management models adopted at many colleges and universities prompted public colleges to use financial aid packages to influence student enrollment decisions, mirroring practices already commonplace among private colleges. In response to these trends toward privatization, colleges adopted even more businesslike behaviors in search of more funding — a process Slaughter and Leslie (1997) describe as "academic capitalism."

Even though demographers predict a 26 percent increase in the number of high school graduates between 1996 and 2008, colleges are placing greater emphasis on admissions

marketing; and pressure on students and their choice processes is increasing. Private and public colleges have adopted complex financial aid strategies to increase the number of students with desired characteristics. Increased availability of non-need-based scholarship aid has students considering more institutions earlier, as they and their parents look for the "best deal." Many private colleges have initiated early admission and early-decision admission strategies to increase the numbers of affluent and academically qualified students. Such practices have increased the pressure on high school students and their families because, if they hope to be competitive in early-admission opportunities, students must have impressive qualifications.

The emergence of electronic technologies such as CD-ROMs, the Internet, e-mail and the World Wide Web also has had an impact on admissions recruitment. With just the click of a button, high school students have a wealth of information at their fingertips. These new technologies also make it easier for admissions personnel to contact students more frequently and in a much more personalized way than ever before.

The increase in marketing by colleges made the "admissions game" more visible.

Rankings publications and guidebooks such as *U.S. News & World Report's "America's Best Colleges,"* *Time* magazine's special issue on colleges, the *Princeton Review* and numerous other publications appear to have increased the information available to students while emphasizing the importance of making a sound decision. As a result, more and more high school students and their parents are turning to private counselors to help them effectively use aggressive scholarship and early-admissions programs, and to allow them to take full advantage of new technologies and the growing influence of rankings publications.

With more students applying to respected colleges and universities, high school students

planning to attend four-year residential institutions now gather most of their information in either the spring of their junior year or the summer before their senior year, submitting their applications between October and December of their senior year. College-bound students report that they feel more pressure and that they believe their college choice to be a crucial decision. Many educators are raising concerns about one alarming trend: The senior year of high school has been "lost" for many students. They apply to colleges too early and learn of their admissions status so soon that they no longer feel the need to study or focus on their final year.



Anticipating the future

Today, with more than 14 million students enrolled in more than 4,000 postsecondary institutions, higher education has become much more diverse than ever before (U.S. Department of Education, 1999; U. S. Department of Education, 2000). The importance attached to earning a college degree also has grown, with parental influence on students' choice processes remaining relatively constant. Perennial issues such as funding and access to higher education link a troubled past to the present, while current trends in student college-choice patterns predict a tumultuous future.

In this report, we have tried to combine social history, public policy, higher education research and institutional and student perspectives in order to consider the continuities and changes in the college-choice process since before World War II. In this concluding section, we look at current trends — in public policy, at institutions and among students and families — and the implications of these trends for the future of the college-choice process.

Public policy trends

There have been remarkable shifts in public policies and changes in institutional strategies and activities during the years we have examined. Postsecondary participation rates have increased

dramatically. Early shifts in public policy expanded access to more citizens through the GI Bill, court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and the expansion of the community college system. Since the early 1980s, public policy shifts have reflected a rather widespread belief that the private benefits of higher education supercede the public benefits; there are few indications that this will change anytime soon. Most of the recent public policy debates regarding the college-choice process have focused on the structure and use of federal loan programs to make college affordable. It is argued that, since most of the benefits of higher education are personal, students borrow to pay for the costs of attendance rather than receive "gift aid" from tax-funded aid programs. Though efforts to increase federal need-based grants have generally been modest or unsuccessful, state grant programs have grown dramatically since the 1980s; the constant-dollar value of these programs stagnated during the 1990s, and current economic conditions in most

There is now widespread belief that the private benefits of higher education supercede the public benefits.

states make any increases unlikely. It is quite likely, however, that student loan programs will continue to be the primary mechanism for assuring both access and choice in the student college-choice process, which does not bode well for equity in the college-choice decisions of high school graduates.

It is unlikely that any new federal initiatives such as the GI Bill or the desegregation legal opinions of the 1950s and '60s will emerge. Some of the strongest language in a recent U.S. Supreme Court opinion in a Michigan case stated that, in 25 years, affirmative-action admissions policies shouldn't be necessary. Though this opinion focuses specifically on issues of ethnicity and diversity in college admissions, there are growing concerns about the economic stratification of college destinations. There is ample evidence that students from middle-income and upper-income families are attending four-year institutions, while low-income students are concentrated in two-year community colleges. These patterns demonstrate

There are growing concerns about the economic stratification of college destinations.

serious constraints on the college-choice process for many students, especially students of color, who disproportionately come from lower-income families. These trends represent important issues for public policy-makers in this and the coming decades. Many

educators and researchers are troubled by the impact of admissions tests on equity and access at four-year colleges and universities, as well as the failure to address the growing financial inequities of federal and state student financial aid policies. There does not appear to be much interest among public policy-makers or the general public to use affirmative-action laws or other legal or statutory means, or to invest the necessary dollars in student financial assistance programs to enhance economic or ethnic diversity in student enrollments.

Institutional trends

Despite increasing numbers of high school graduates in many states, there is little evidence of a decline in competition among four-year colleges for students. Intent to increase the number of students, as well as the quality and/or the diversity of enrolled students, will likely result in continued or increased marketing and recruitment activities at many four-year colleges and universities, as well as at some two-year colleges. The growing number of high school students, especially in several high-growth states, may inspire more campus leaders to strive to "move up" the college status ladder and further increase the competition for high-ability students. This will also continue the growing emphasis on use of merit-based aid to achieve enrollment-management goals and will accentuate the pressure felt by high school students.

Since there are few reasons to expect increases in state appropriations for public colleges, more and more of them will increase their tuition and more aggressively recruit desirable students in order to offset budget shortfalls. These practices will lead to greater use of campus-based tuition discounting in public colleges and likely reduce the availability of campus need-based aid to help students attend these institutions. These trends are likely to continue, worsening the inequities for college-bound students. College enrollment figures will become increasingly stratified by students' socioeconomic status, with an even greater proportion of low-income students attending two-year colleges.

It will be interesting to see how colleges and universities negotiate the issues associated with the May 1 application deadline and early-decision admissions plans. Springtime application deadlines have been promulgated over time by higher education association organizations, led by Ivy League institutions. Public policy-makers and educational observers are uniformly critical of the negative impact of early-decision plans on students and their high school experience. Elite private institutions are the primary users of both early-application and early-decision admissions options.

For example, if fewer institutions decided to adhere strictly to a May 1 deadline (because they are disadvantaged by enforcing it), or if more campuses chose to participate in early-decision programs, chaos in the college decision-making process would follow, and students and their families would be further disadvantaged. This could return us to a more chaotic period for students and colleges — a period similar to the one experienced prior to the establishment of a common application date in the 1950s. In some ways this is already starting to happen: Many colleges use earlier dates for preferential treatment regarding housing assignments, orientation and registration dates and, in some instances, require earlier acceptance of scholarships they offer to students.

All of these subtle changes erode the original purpose of the May 1 deadline. Indeed, the decision of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) in the fall of 2003 to no longer attempt to enforce its policies regarding early decision reflects the problems that students, families and institutions face in preventing increased competition from creating more anxiety and disorder. During the past 50 years, the College Board and NACAC played a role in helping to address issues of this kind. It is unclear if enough of a consensus and influence exist among the various segments of higher education — and in the guidance and counseling community — to enable these organizations to successfully address the challenges of the current market economy in which many colleges and universities exist.

Trends among students and families

While many aspects of the college-choice process have changed during the past 50 years, some important things remain the same. Cost of attendance and proximity to students' homes continue to be important factors in choosing colleges. Also, for most high school students, parents continue to play an influential role in their children's college decisions. Given current trends, the junior year will likely become the year during

which most students conduct their college search and decide where to apply. Unless there is a breakdown of the consensus among institutions around the May 1 admission deadline date or unless early-decision programs receive greater emphasis, students are unlikely to apply much earlier.

Increasingly varied and complex financial aid programs at the institutional, state and federal levels are further complicating the college-choice process. Early-decision and early-admission programs, along with the rise of rankings, make it harder for many students and families to make good decisions because they are unfamiliar with this new world of marketing and consumerism among colleges and universities. Affluent families turn to private college counselors, but many middle- and lower-income families do not know how to get their children to their desired college destination. Family income and attendance at private high schools widen the divide among the students who have — and those who lack — access to the information needed to make an informed college choice.

In the coming years, we may see two distinct faces of the college-choice process: While we may laud the social progress made in the past 60 or 70 years because of the increased number of women, low-income students and students of color now enrolled, a closer examination of students' destinations will reveal one set of choices for low- and moderate-income students and a distinctly different set of destinations for middle- and upper-income students.

Educators, students and their families should also be aware of the growing sense that college choice is a critical decision, one that can determine or create the desired life paths of students. Although literature regarding college students'

In the coming years, we may see two distinct faces of the college-choice process.

experiences clearly supports that this choice has a relatively modest effect on a student's lifetime income, career mobility and quality of life, the media's focus on college rankings leads many to believe the effects are profound.

As a result, many students feel the pressure to start and complete their decision-making process and to secure the necessary financial means as early as possible. Although some students have the

means and the resources to conduct expansive search and choice processes, many lack the economic and cultural capital to understand these pressures and lack the financial means to consider a range of college destinations. It's easy to see how students in this latter group might well feel that many of the decisions that constitute the college-choice process are simply not available to them; that their options are sadly and unfairly limited.



Tables

Table 1: Number of postsecondary institutions by type – 1949-1999

Year	Public			Private			Total
	4-year	2-year	Total	4-year	2-year	Total	
1949-50*	344	297	641	983	227	1,210	1,851
1954-55*	353	295	648	980	221	1,201	1,849
1959-60*	367	328	695	1,055	254	1,309	2,004
1964-65*	393	406	799	1,128	248	1,376	2,175
1969-70*	426	634	1,060	1,213	252	1,465	2,525
1974-75*	447	767	1,200	1,297	236	1,533	2,747
1977-78	454	787	1,241	1,354	231	1,585	2,826
1979-80*	464	846	1,310	1,399	266	1,665	2,975
1982-83	471	869	1,340	1,412	360†	1,743	3,083
1984-85*	461	868	1,329	1,450	367	1,817	3,146
1987-88**	599	992	1,591	1,536	460	1,996	3,587
1992-93**	600	1,024	1,624	1,569	445	2,014	3,638
1997-98	615	1,092	1,707	1,694	663	2,357	4,064
1998-99	613	1,075	1,688	1,730	652	2,382	4,070

* Numbers for these years do not include branch campuses.

** Because of revised survey procedures, data are not entirely comparable with figures for earlier years. The number of branch campuses reporting separately has increased since 1986-87.

† Large increases are due to the addition of schools accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys, and Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), "Fall Enrollment" surveys. *Digest of Education Statistics 2000*, Table 245.

Table 2: Student enrollment by year – 1947-1997

Year	Full-time	Part-time	Men	Women	Total enrollment
1947	No data available	No data available	1,659,249	678,977	2,338,226
1952	No data available	No data available	1,380,357	753,885	2,134,242
1957	No data available	No data available	2,170,765	1,153,081	3,323,783
1965	4,095,728	1,825,136*	3,630,020	2,290,844	5,920,864
1970	5,816,290	2,764,597	5,043,642	3,537,245	8,580,887
1975	6,841,334	4,343,525	6,148,997	5,035,862	11,184,859
1980	7,097,958	4,998,937	5,874,374	6,222,521	12,096,895
1985	7,075,221	5,171,832	5,818,450	6,428,605	12,247,055
1990	7,820,985	5,997,652	6,283,909	7,534,728	13,818,637
1995	8,128,802	6,132,979	6,342,593	7,919,242	14,261,781
1997	8,332,362	6,023,054	6,329,960	8,015,456	14,345,416

* Includes part-time resident students and all extension students.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys, and Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), "Fall Enrollment" surveys. *Digest of Education Statistics 1999*, Table 175.

Table 3: Student enrollment by type of institution – 1947-1997

Year	Public	Private			Total for all schools
		Nonprofit	Proprietary	Total private	
1947	1,152,377	No data available	No data available	1,185,849	2,338,226
1952	1,101,240	No data available	No data available	1,033,002	2,134,242
1957	1,972,673	No data available	No data available	1,351,110	3,323,783
1965	5,969,596	No data available	No data available	1,951,268	7,920,864
1970	6,428,134	No data available	No data available	2,152,753	8,580,887
1975	8,834,508	No data available	No data available	2,350,351	11,184,859
1980	9,457,394	2,527,787	111,714*	2,639,501	12,096,895
1985	9,479,273	2,571,791	195,991	2,767,782	12,247,055
1990	10,844,717	2,760,227	213,693	2,973,920	13,818,637
1995	11,092,374	2,929,044	240,363	3,169,407	14,261,781
1997	11,146,155	2,961,714	237,547	3,199,261	14,345,416

* Large increases are due to the addition of schools accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys, and Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), "Fall Enrollment" surveys. *Digest of Education Statistics 1999*, Table 175.

Table 4: Student enrollment by race/ethnicity – 1976-1997
(Student numbers in the thousands)

Year	White non- Hispanic	Black non- Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian or Pacific Islander	American Indian or Alaskan Native	Non- resident alien	Total
1976	9,076.1	1,033.0	383.8	197.9	76.1	218.7	10,985.6
1980	9,833.0	1,106.8	471.7	286.4	83.9	305.0	12,086.8
1990	10,722.5	1,247.0	782.4	572.4	102.8	391.5	13,818.6
1995	10,311.2	1,473.7	1,093.8	797.4	131.3	454.4	14,261.8
1996	10,226.0	1,499.4	1,152.2	823.6	134.0	464.9	14,300.3
1997	10,160.9	1,532.8	1,200.1	851.5	138.8	461.3	14,345.4

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys, and Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), "Fall Enrollment" surveys. *Digest of Education Statistics 1999*, Table 209.



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Endnotes

- ¹ At the time of the study, RIT was a two-year college but in 1953 gained authority to award bachelor's degrees.
- ² Tuition discounting is the practice of reducing the cost of attendance to individual students by replacing portions of their tuition with funded and unfunded student aid (Allan, 1999).
- ³ Full citation for *Grutter v. Bollinger*: 288 F.3d 732 (6th Cir. 2002).
- ⁴ Full citation for *Gratz v. Bollinger*: 135 F. Supp. 2d 790 (E.D. Mich. 2001); 122 F. Supp. 2d 811 (E.D. Mich. 2000); cert. granted, 71 U.S.L.W. 3387 (2002).



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