



# Changing Admissions Policies

*Mounting Pressures, New Developments,  
Key Questions*

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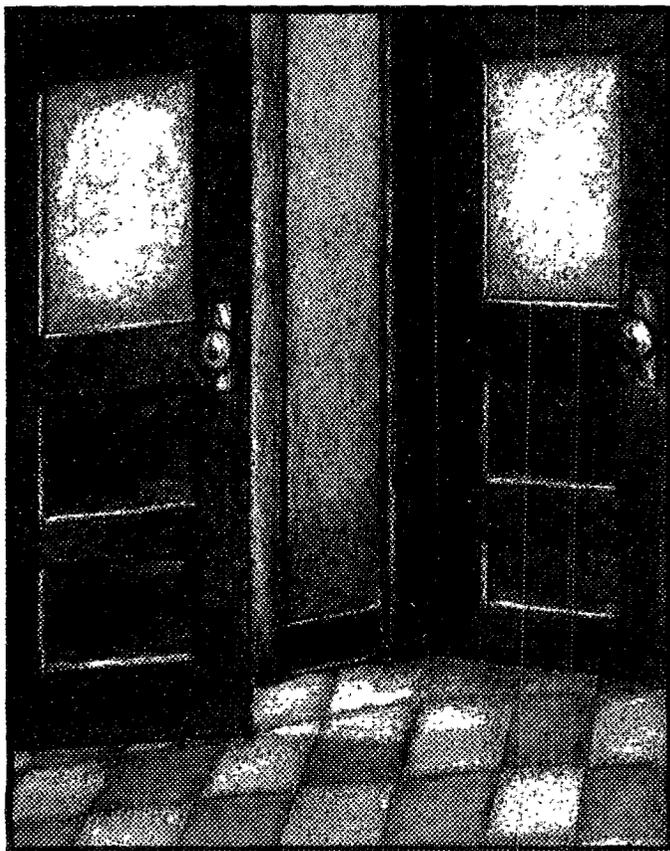
**C**olleges and universities face growing pressure to change their undergraduate admissions policies. In addition to highly publicized controversies over affirmative action, other forces for change include the continuing desire to increase completion rates in bachelor's programs, the spread of interdisciplinary and applied learning in high schools, the creation of new performance-based standards for high school graduation by many states, and the rapid proliferation of charter schools and home schooling.

In response to these pressures, in the 1990s a number of states began developing new procedures for assessing students' college readiness. Instead of relying on students' grades listed on high school transcripts, these states are allowing schools and students to submit more direct evidence about what students know and are able to do. This usually includes

teachers' ratings of the quality of students' performance in defined academic subject areas, and also may include judgments about more generic skills and dispositions such as writing, speaking, planning, organizing, problem-solving, and working in groups. Influential organizations—including the Association of American Universities and the National Governors'

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Association—have endorsed efforts to find new ways to assess high school students' fitness for college.

## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Before describing specific state initiatives, let's consider the problems these initiatives are attempting to solve. On top of long-standing concerns about the tendency of college admissions procedures to select relatively small numbers of low-income and minority students, we see four distinct trends that are prompting the current reconsideration of admissions procedures.

### 1) *Economic Conditions*

Rapid economic change has favored college graduates, causing greater numbers of students to want to earn a bachelor's degree. Recognizing the needs of a changing economy, many high schools have reorganized their instructional programs, but traditional college admission requirements—based on courses in specified subjects—inhibit some of the changes they are trying to make.

Higher education has attracted a growing share of high school graduates over the last 25 years. The proportion of high school graduates who go directly to a college or university that awards bachelor's degrees has grown fairly steadily from 31.7 percent in 1973 to 41.9 percent in 1996, holding at 41.2 percent in 1998. In addition, a portion of the approximately 20 percent of high school graduates who go directly to two-year colleges later transfer to institutions that award bachelor's degrees. In sum, since the early 1980s, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded has been growing faster than the 20- to 24-year-old population.

Enrollment growth in college and university programs that lead to bachelor's degrees is in part a response to increasing economic payoff. Simple comparisons of median earnings re-

veal a clear trend. Among 25- to 34-year-olds, for example, men with at least a bachelor's degree earned on average an additional 24 percent over the annual salaries of high school graduates in 1970, but by 1996 the college graduates' advantage had grown to 54 percent. For women, the additional earnings of college graduates compared to high school graduates rose from 68 percent in 1970 to 88 percent by 1996. Other measures of the economic payoff to college graduates show a similar positive trend over this period.

Although gaining access to a better-paying job is not the only reason to go to college, it is an important one. A direct indication that many students attend college for career-related reasons is reflected in the proportion of bachelor's degrees earned in occupational majors: business management, engineering, education, health sciences, computer and information sciences, and other technical or professional fields. These expanded from 50.1 percent of all bachelor's degrees granted in 1971 to a peak of 65 percent in 1986, then fluctuated around 58 to 60 percent through 1995.

Economists have tried to determine whether the rising payoff for a college degree is attributable to changes on the supply side of the labor market, on the demand side, or both. The evidence indicates that rising demand for college graduates on the part of employers has been the major driving force. A leading hypothesis is that a faster pace of economic and technological change increases the relative advantage of college graduates because more education increases a person's capacity to anticipate and adapt to change.

The same economic changes that have contributed to the rising payoff associated with earning a bachelor's degree have also helped to stimulate a major reform movement in high schools and community colleges. On the assumption that initial education and training now provide a smaller fraction of the knowledge and skills that people will need throughout their working lifetimes, high schools and two-year colleges are offering programs that will keep students' future options open through continued work-related learning. High schools in particular are devising new courses that weave college-preparatory subject matter together with applications and experiences related to specific industries, occupations, or careers.

Federal legislation in 1990, 1994, and 1998—as well as laws in many states—has encouraged new partnerships between schools and employers and work-based learning designed to prepare students for both work and further education. Some of these efforts are diffuse and difficult to evaluate; however, one relatively well-defined model called a “career academy” has produced solid evidence that illustrates the positive impact on academic performance, especially for students most at risk of not finishing high school.

Unfortunately, while K-12 educators are trying to respond to changing economic conditions by developing such programs, traditional collegiate admissions procedures can present a serious obstacle to change. This is because such admissions procedures cannot recognize the integrated curriculum and applied learning experiences in which more students are now engaging. Worse yet, conventional admission procedures may actively penalize students in high schools and two-year colleges who spend time on applied or work-related projects instead of covering the traditional syllabus in college-prep subjects. Fearing they will jeopardize students' chances

## Increasingly common practices

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of admission to selective colleges, some teachers and administrators are reluctant to pursue such reforms even if they believe that students would benefit in other ways. A report by the National Governors' Association summed up the problem:

Schools vitally need colleges and universities to support their reforms, most urgently in accommodating non-traditional high school transcripts and educational experiences in the admissions process.... On the one hand, postsecondary institutions are avoiding revising admissions standards until they see what shape the reforms will take and how widespread they will be. On the other hand, many states and school districts are reluctant to pursue reform efforts more aggressively until they are sure that higher education admissions processes will accommodate their students.

The reluctance of colleges and universities to alter their admissions procedures thus threatens to create an impasse.

What particularly inhibits curricular innovation in high schools is the colleges' basic reliance on Carnegie units to measure student performance. During the past century, college admissions offices have come to rely on Carnegie units to specify the amount of required coursework and to weight grades received in different high school courses in order to compute grade-point averages used to rank students.

According to a survey of the institutional members of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, the five most important factors used in traditional admissions procedures are high school grade-point averages, admissions test scores, patterns of high school coursework, college-level coursework completed, and class rank. Similarly, a 1998 State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) survey found that 91 percent of the state college and university respondents "require or recommend" specific high school coursework units for admission; and 24 percent have a minimum GPA requirement (often based upon individual campus cutoff points).

The basic problem is that recent high school reforms are moving away from relying on a schedule based on specific classes delivered in a structured amount of time. And increasingly common practices like project-based learning, internships, and interdisciplinary classes simply do not lend themselves to Carnegie unit measurement. College admissions offices often find it difficult to evaluate applicants whose transcripts and application materials include evidence drawn from student exhibitions, competency profiles, portfolios, or other information showing what students have done or can do, even though the skills they reflect may be highly related to successful college performance.

### 2) High Attrition Levels

A second reason questions are being raised about current admissions procedures is that many of the students who enter colleges seeking bachelor's degrees never earn one. Traditional measures of college readiness like test scores and grade-

point averages leave much of the variance in college success unexplained. Growing attention to these issues, together with advances in assessment technique, has led to greater interest in developing admissions procedures that are better able to identify students who will actually complete their degrees.

The fact that many students in bachelor's programs never complete degrees is a serious concern for public policymakers because most of these students are in tax-supported, public institutions. Closely related is the large number of students who require costly remedial instruction when they enter college. In 1995, for instance, 22 percent of freshmen in public institutions that award bachelor's degrees enrolled in remedial reading, writing, or math courses. The term "four-year" college has thus come to be regarded as a misnomer because fewer than half of all students entering a bachelor's-degree-granting institution actually receive that degree within four years.

Such low completion rates suggest that there is plenty of room for improving student selection. The indicators most commonly used by college admissions offices—high school grades and standardized test scores—have been validated mainly by their ability to predict students' grades in the freshman year. Yet these indicators account for less than half of the variance in freshman grades, according to statistical studies.

Part of the reason why high school records do not predict college performance very well is that high school grading standards vary between schools, and even within schools. Course content also varies from place to place. The net result is that two students whose transcripts both show an "A" in eleventh-grade "Biology" courses may actually have very different levels of knowledge in the field. Similarly, two students who both received a "B" in courses called "American Literature" may, in fact, have very different levels of command of American literature. High school grades also appear to have been subject to inflation in recent years. Students who want to maximize their high school GPA to enhance their college applications have a strong incentive to choose relatively easy courses. To offset this temptation, some colleges and universities award a grade-point bonus for taking "honors" or Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Either way, grade inflation results. Variations in these practices across high schools further undermine the reliability of high school grades as a measure of student performance.

Even if traditional admissions measures could accurately predict freshman grades in college, the fact is that freshman grades themselves are not good predictors of degree completion. As Adelman's exhaustive 1999 longitudinal study of national transcript data found:

When the academic intensity and quality of one's high school curriculum is such a dominant determinant of degree completion, and both test scores and (especially) high school grade-point average or class rank are so much weaker contributors to attainment, college admissions formulas that emphasize test

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scores and (especially) high school grade-point average or class rank are likely to result in lower completion rates.

One strategy that highly selective colleges and universities recently have adopted to identify students clearly capable of completing college-level work is to put greater emphasis on AP tests, and thus depend less on high school grades. Conceivably, such uses of AP exams could continue to expand, becoming a gold standard to replace the tin standard of high school grades. But these tests were not designed to be general-purpose screens for college entry and their levels of difficulty are too high for most postsecondary institutions. Because high schools in low-income urban and rural communities offer fewer AP courses, increased reliance on AP tests would further exacerbate the difficulty of recruiting low-income and minority students, unless strong measures are taken to equalize access to AP courses while in high school.

Finally, although it is quite plausible to suppose that the students who pass AP exams are more likely to complete their bachelor's degrees, it has not yet been rigorously demonstrated that AP scores add much to the predictability of who will complete a degree when other student characteristics are taken into account.

### **3) Changing High School Exit Requirements**

Yet another source of pressure on higher education admissions procedures comes from new high school proficiency standards and exit examinations. In recent years, almost all states have formulated explicit standards for student performance in elementary and secondary education. Traditional college admissions procedures do not mesh well with these new, more detailed specifications.

Most states now recognize that the names of courses taken during high school should matter less than what students actually learn. As of 1999, 40 states had adopted new standards for student performance in core academic subjects. These standards usually consist of detailed lists of what students are expected to know and be able to do at successive grade levels in each subject. Many of these states are administering statewide tests geared to the new standards. Often, schools are being held accountable for students' progress on these tests through publication of students' test results for each school. Some states have gone even further, creating incentive systems that reward high-performing schools with extra resources—sometimes including extra pay for teachers—and threaten low-performing schools with various sanctions, including state takeover.

These new performance-based standards and expectations for students can be sharply at odds with traditional measures colleges and universities use to select students. Fuhrman (1999) puts the matter succinctly:

As all states (with the possible exception of Iowa) are moving to set expectations for student learning and developing assessments aligned to those expectations, it is natural to ask how colleges and

universities are reinforcing those expectations. They are not doing so by relying on measures of seat time in subjects (Carnegie units) without respect to whether the student has learned the material (except through grades that are very difficult to interpret) and to whether the material is worthwhile (aligned to standards). They are not doing so by relying on the SAT I or ACT (which are deliberately divorced from curriculum). So there will come a time when policymakers and educators will ask that colleges send appropriate incentives by looking for evidence of achievement of standards in applicants' materials.

Evidently, that time has already come in at least the 14 states that in 1997 had undertaken formal initiatives to re-examine or redesign their admissions procedures for public colleges and universities, according to a survey by SHEEO.

Science and scientific procedure are among the achievements on which American colleges and universities can justifiably pride themselves. When it comes to admitting students, however, higher education institutions are still relying on procedures from the industrial age (Carnegie units), which are increasingly outdated in the information age. New standards and assessments in K-12 education are forcing colleges and universities to recognize just how old-fashioned and imprecise their traditional admissions procedures are. At the same time, the public policymakers responsible for crafting and establishing such standards-based high school exit requirements are not likely to sit idly by if public colleges continue to ignore them.

### **4) The Changing Face of Schools**

A fourth impetus for change is that growing numbers of students are providing colleges and universities with unorthodox transcripts, which are difficult to evaluate by traditional methods. Colleges and universities will be receiving larger and larger numbers of such transcripts from the graduates of charter schools and home schooling—two rapidly growing segments of American education. Since Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991, at least 33 additional states have followed suit. By 1997-98, charter school enrollment had grown to about 160,000 students. Of the 1,050 charter schools operating in September 1998, about 70 percent were newly created; the rest were pre-existing public or private schools that won charters from the district or state. State laws vary, but all exempt charter schools from some of the traditional state or local requirements that apply to other public schools. Indeed, the main purpose of charters is to give groups of people more latitude in creating the kinds of schools they want while still receiving public funds.

Approximately one-third of charter schools include twelfth grade, and graduates from these schools will be applying to colleges and universities in growing numbers. Some charter schools may be able to supply traditional transcripts, but others may not. If the curriculum includes substantial amounts of interdisciplinary instruction or experiential learning, they may have difficulty demonstrating that their graduates meet traditional course-based requirements for admission to higher edu-

cation—despite the fact that charter schools often employ a broad array of methods to assess student performance, including standardized tests, student portfolios, and demonstrations of student work. The problem these schools will encounter is similar to that faced by the public high schools that have tried to devise integrated course sequences to prepare students for the new economy. Without direct methods for determining whether students possess the knowledge and capabilities necessary for college, admissions offices will have great difficulty evaluating these applications.

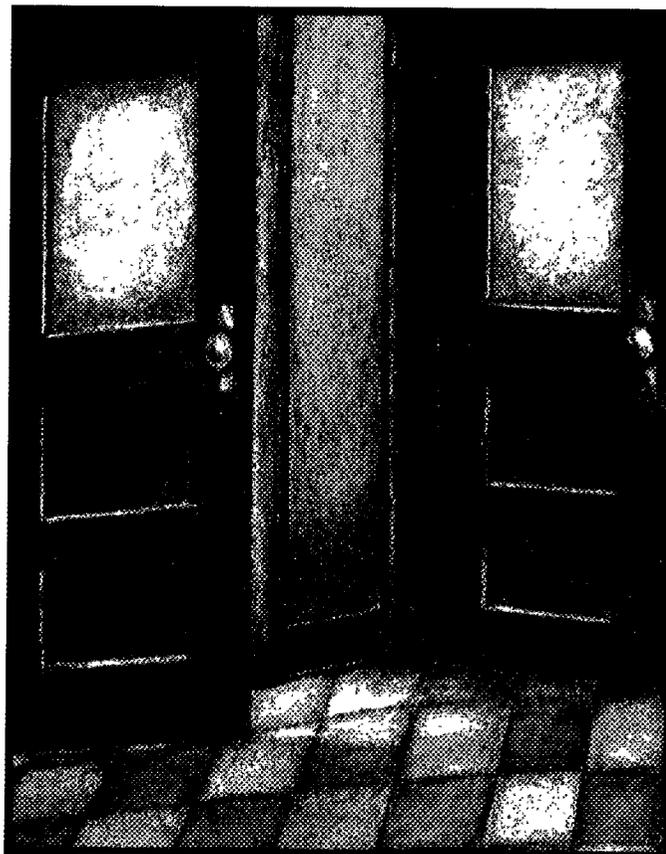
This difficulty may be even greater for the growing number of students who graduate from home schooling. The number of home schoolers in the country as a whole is estimated to have tripled from 250,000 in 1990-91 to 750,000 in 1995-96. Available estimates are only approximate, though, because many parents who are schooling their children at home do not register with the district or state, even though they are legally obliged to do so. The Internet and greater willingness of local school districts to accommodate home schoolers account for some of this rapid growth. Available evidence suggests that home schoolers are achieving at very high levels and many home-schooling parents are both affluent and well-educated. Even if these students are well-prepared for college, however, the burgeoning numbers of home-schooled graduates pose a growing challenge to college and university admissions offices, because they won't possess transcripts based on recognizable Carnegie units and grade-point averages.

## RESPONDING TO PRESSURES FOR CHANGE

How are states responding to these four challenges by rethinking college admissions? Wisconsin is the first state to implement new procedures, adopting what it calls Competency-Based Admissions (CBA). The new policy was stimulated by the interest of University of Wisconsin (UW) systemwide administrators in supporting high school curricular reforms. Beginning in 1996, a pilot study evaluated the feasibility of admitting students using competency-based assessments instead of traditional letter grades and Carnegie units. The UW system board of regents requested that the CBA Pilot Project be completed on a limited scale with a representative sample of Wisconsin schools.

To implement this pilot, faculty from several high schools and UW campuses worked together to formulate lists of competencies in five subject areas: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign languages. The result was a Standardized Reporting Profile (SRP), which details students' abilities under specific competency areas within each of the five academic subjects. Competency scores are given on a five-point scale, where a score of three indicates a level appropriate for introductory college-level work in the UW system.

In the two years of the pilot study, all but one of the 14 UW institutions admitted students on the basis of their CBA profiles. To evaluate the effectiveness of this new procedure, students provided two sets of data to college admissions officers. One contained traditional admissions information such as transcript, class rank, ACT test score, and an application for admission. The other contained CBA information including the SRP, ACT test score, and an admission application. A separate and independent admission decision was made using each of these files. Students who met the statistical criteria under ei-



ther one or both of the processes were granted admission.

For the students who actually enrolled in UW, the SRP information correlated very well with their college performance. In fact, SRP scores were just as effective in predicting student first-year outcomes as traditional admissions information. The combined SRP scores for English, mathematics, social studies, and science—plus credits attempted in the first term—explained 46 percent of the variance in first-term grades. The combination of high school grade-point average, class rank, and ACT composite score, plus credits attempted, also explained 46 percent of the variance in the first-term grades. On the strength of these results, the UW board of regents adopted the CBA as an official part of its admissions policy in December 1997, by allowing applicants to submit SRP information in addition to (or in lieu of) the traditional high school transcript. The door is now officially open, but very few students are using it, in part because filling out the SRP requires significantly more time for teachers and counselors.

Oregon is in the process of implementing broad-scale education reforms, some of which address these growing admissions issues. Many of these changes began in 1991 with the passage of the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century. With this legislation the state embraced a vision of educational reform spanning the K-16 system, a reform based on the mastery of criterion-referenced standards by all students as they progress through the public school system. At the high school level, Oregon also is introducing two new certification levels: the Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM), for which students are expected to demonstrate proficiency at the tenth-grade level on state tests and classroom assignments in English, mathematics, science, social science, the arts, and a foreign language; the second certification level is the Certificate of Advanced Mastery (CAM), for which students are expected

## RELATED READINGS

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to meet new career-related learning standards in addition to twelfth-grade subject area standards. These certificates will be awarded based on students' performance, not grades or credits.

The culmination of Oregon's legislated postsecondary reform is the Proficiency-based Admission Standards System (PASS), which establishes college admission standards as extensions of the high school standards CIM and CAM embody. To accomplish this, the developers of PASS formed a task-force made up of faculty from Oregon public universities, community colleges, and high schools to describe the hierarchies of content knowledge and process skills required for admission to Oregon's bachelor's-degree-granting colleges and universities.

The PASS design calls for assessing students in six content and nine process areas using a variety of assessment methods, and the results of all 15 assessments would be recorded in a student's Proficiency Transcript Report (PTR). Assessment methods include using criterion-referenced tests (related to those used for the CIM and CAM), Common Assessment Tasks (CATs), and teacher verifications of students' work. The PTR would become the basis for admission to Oregon's postsecondary institutions.

Beginning in 2001, Oregon public high school students applying to any public university can meet these subject-area requirements using their PTR to provide evidence of their proficiency in English and mathematics. Potential students will still need to take the SAT or ACT admissions tests. Over the next four years, students can choose the PTR to demonstrate proficiency in science (2002), social sciences (2003), the arts (2004), and second languages (2005). Beginning fall 2005, applicants from Oregon public high schools must meet proficiency requirements in all six PTR subject areas. Although all students will need to demonstrate a baseline proficiency level for admission, individual institutions might require higher proficiency levels in some content areas.

Washington state is developing a CBA system very similar to Oregon's PASS. In 1993, Washington's legislature passed

the Basic Education Act, establishing the Commission on Student Learning that would identify content standards for what all public school students should know and be able to do. The commission also was directed to develop a performance-based education system along with a functional student assessment and accountability plan. As part of the new assessment system, students would be required to demonstrate their mastery in a set of defined content areas by the tenth grade, leading to a new graduation requirement called a Certificate of Mastery. Finally, the commission was expected to recommend establishing college entrance requirements consistent with newly developed content standards.

After setting competency standards and assessment measures for students through high school, Washington plans to revise its existing uniform high school transcript. The new assessment system will clarify the types of courses deemed appropriate for college admission. Students will be admitted based on subject competency rather than seat-time in any specific college preparatory class.

An Admissions Standards Action Committee (ASAC) was established to examine the standards students need to gain entrance into a four-year college, to translate current standards into mastery terms, and to identify how these mastery standards will be measured and reported by high schools. Pilot testing of new admissions standards was planned in three high schools in 2000. As of 2006, all graduating public high school seniors applying to any Washington public university must have met competency-based standards defined at both the K-12 and baccalaureate levels.

In fall 1993, the Transitions Project was launched in California to address the perceived college admissions roadblocks to high school reform. Unlike initiatives in the other states, which began at the state level, a group of California high schools attempting to change admissions procedures in public state universities sparked California's Transitions Project. Transitions thus gave the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) another way to respond to reform initiatives in California high schools.

The project attempts to catalyze and accelerate secondary school reform by designing alternative transcripts that report student achievement in terms of performance rather than units, grades, and traditional course patterns. These new transcripts would not only reflect local efforts to restructure schools, but also provide valid and reliable indicators of student readiness to engage in university-level work, technical training, employment, and other postsecondary options.

After four years of collaboration between UC, CSU, and a small set of high schools, both universities have agreed to accept transcripts on which students' performance is assessed by teachers and reported in terms other than course grades. Several hundred students have taken advantage of this option. Some students have been admitted to CSU on the basis of these alternative transcripts, but not to UC.

Implementation of the Transitions Project was hampered by lack of state leadership. Some high school communities were reluctant to invest in a completely different assessment system without being assured that the universities would welcome it. But universities cannot give such assurances until they know whether a new system is valid—a determination they can't make without complete transcripts and an evaluation of signif-

icant numbers of students admitted on the basis of Transitions transcripts. Resolving this impasse is likely to require active leadership by the universities themselves.

## KEY QUESTIONS

Despite the mounting pressures for change, it is not clear how far or how fast the development of new admissions procedures will go. This will depend in part on answers to two basic questions: one about cost and the other about values. Existing admissions procedures in public colleges and universities are well adapted to handle large volumes of applications quickly, cheaply, and defensibly. One question emerging from experiences in these four states is who will pay for the extra cost of new admissions procedures. It is conceivable that colleges and universities themselves might have to absorb some or all of this cost, if state legislatures would augment their budgets for this purpose. To do so, legislators must be convinced that the new procedures would enable them to raise degree-completion rates, to handle rising numbers of non-traditional transcripts, or to effectively and legally admit more students from low-income families and under-represented minority groups. Thus far, Oregon and Washington are the only states that have demonstrated some willingness to share costs.

As long as public colleges and universities have an overabundance of applicants, they have little incentive to take on the cost of new admissions procedures. In all four states noted above, most of the cost has been borne by high school teachers and counselors who have been asked to fill out new student profiles on top of all their other duties. Teachers and counselors who are enthusiastic about new assessment procedures have been willing to make this sacrifice.

However, if large numbers of seniors start asking for new kinds of record-keeping and appraisal by their high schools, the burden on teachers will be considerable. Teachers and their unions probably will resist, and will likely demand that school districts or states pay the extra costs to support school staff in conducting these time-consuming assessments. But even if teachers and unions agree with its intent, this agenda is likely to have much lower priority for them than demands for higher salaries, lower class sizes, or time off for professional development.

If high schools and postsecondary institutions both resist paying for new admissions procedures, the only remaining source is applicants and their families, who already pay for SAT, ACT, and AP exams—not to mention the hundreds or thousands of dollars some families pay for private test-preparation courses. If new admissions procedures are to become more widespread, they probably will be based not on student ratings completed voluntarily by high school teachers, but on more elaborate assessments administered directly by testing companies, paid for by applicants and their families.

How would such expanded assessments appropriately reflect the demands of the information economy, increase the likelihood of selecting students who will complete their degrees, mesh with new student performance standards in elementary and secondary education, and accommodate the growing number of unorthodox transcripts that colleges will be receiving? Here is where the question of values becomes explicit. Some of the new assessments being developed in the

four states profiled, especially Oregon and California, are intended to measure attainments other than how well students have internalized facts, theories, concepts, and procedures taught in academic courses. Some of these new assessments also attempt to measure competency in communications (oral, written, and technological), creative and critical inquiry, innovative problem-solving, productive work habits, and capacity for collaboration.

Defenders of the status quo argue that such qualities already should be reflected in existing admissions data, particularly in high school grades. If so, there is no need for new measures. New procedures are useful only if they provide new information. But if new measures are not strongly correlated with high school grades and other existing data, admissions offices will have difficulty determining exactly what the new assessments mean.

This exemplifies a more general problem that must be faced: It is difficult to justify new practices in terms of old values. These new admissions procedures are based fundamentally on the premise that America's university system has an obligation to help reinforce the significant changes that are occurring in elementary and secondary schooling. They also assert that the kinds of abilities needed to succeed in college are not always confined to those learned in formal academic settings or captured in existing standardized test results.

Despite growing pressure for change and the significant steps taken by higher education in a number of states, the further development of new admissions procedures will depend ultimately on whether colleges and universities will embrace and articulate these values to guide the selection of students. □

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