

studentPOLL

MARKET INTELLIGENCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Winners-take-all culture permeates attitudes about college admission.

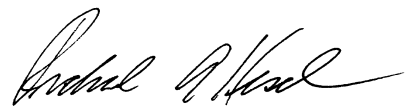
In their widely acclaimed book, *The Winner-Take-All Society*, economists Philip J. Cook and Robert H. Frank devote an entire chapter to college choice, postulating that students and their parents are increasingly inclined to choose colleges society identifies as “winners,” those with high status and affirmed prestige. Cook and Frank define the decision as a “positional choice” through which association with a winning institution positions the student and family as winners. Such behavior, the economists argue, almost pervasively characterizes American culture, from the decisions people make about careers to the growing disparities between the salaries paid to ordinary performers and superstars in professional sports, business, and even the academy. And it explains our society’s increasing obsession with rankings that identify winning institutions, whether they be hospitals and universities or five-star restaurants and hotels.

For those charged with recruiting and enrolling a freshman college class every year, the winners-take-all pattern may be familiar. Many of the findings in this issue of *studentPOLL* directly and indirectly suggest how ubiquitous it is. Several are worth repeating here. Nearly 40 percent of the high-ability students we surveyed decided on a first-choice college before senior year, long before the expensive courting process known as “admissions marketing” even comes close to its peak. And while the first choice may change as the process goes forward, students are hard pressed to let go of whatever first choice they make, even when they are wait-listed by that school. Nearly 60 percent said they would make a tuition deposit at a second-choice institution in anticipation of forfeiting it if they were admitted off the wait list of their first-choice college. More than 40 percent would hold out until the end of June before giving up their position on the wait list of a first-choice school. That’s not all: nearly half would enroll at a

second-choice school with the intention of transferring to the first-choice college.

Of course, the winning institution varies for each student, depending on what his or her SAT or ACT scores, high school record, and talents make possible. But within each competitive group of institutions, market and cultural forces favor those understood to be the winners. Perhaps this pattern explains why the most selective institutions, can induce so many students to close off their options and apply for early decision.

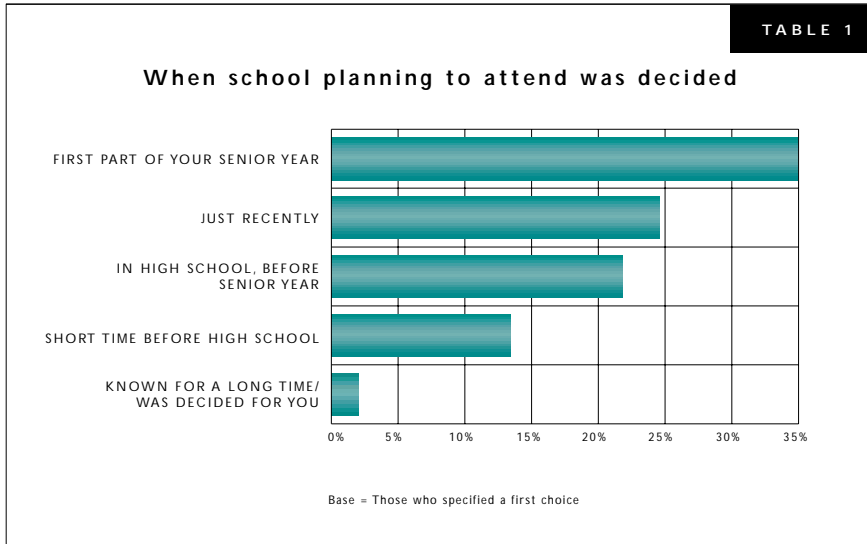
The students, as our findings suggest, see the unfairness in the process. As an extremely bright student put it in a focus group we conducted in Boston several months ago: “What choice do I have? I’ve been admitted to Harvard, but I know I’d be happier at four or five of the other schools that have admitted me. If I turn Harvard down and go, say, to U Mass, my parents, friends, counselor — everybody — will conclude I’m a fool. Some choice!”



Richard A. Hesel

Publisher

1 Two out of five high school seniors select a first-choice college before senior year begins. Another third has made a first-choice selection before college application deadlines are reached.

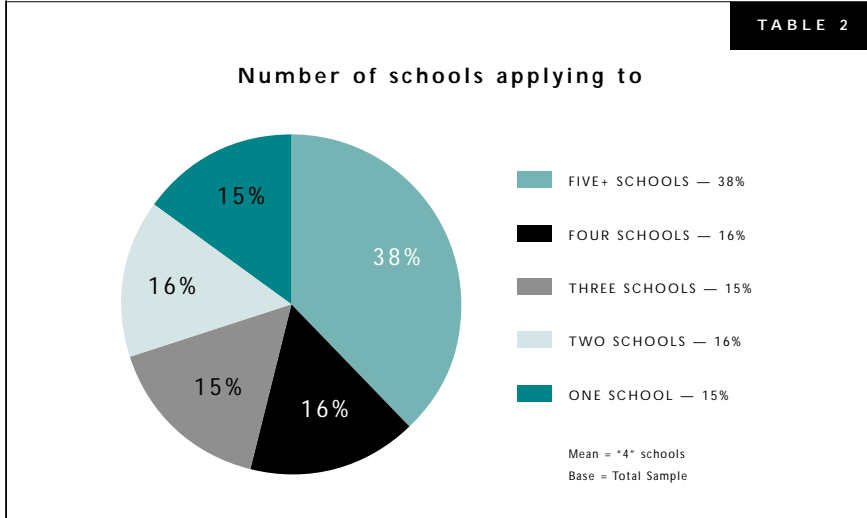


Our findings demonstrate clearly that many students begin thinking seriously about college early in the high school years, often making a decision about their first-choice school before their senior year. Some 39 percent of students surveyed decided where they wanted to attend college before their senior year of high school. Of that total, 14 percent knew “for a long time” and 2 percent knew even before they began high school. While 61 percent of students made their college choice during their senior year, more than half of that group — 35 percent — selected a first-choice school during the first part of the senior year. Together, these findings indicate that a whopping 70 percent of seniors with above average academic ability have already decided on a first-choice school before final college application deadlines are reached. (Table 1)

ADVISORY

Enhance activities that build awareness of your institution and expand personal contact with high school students and their parents before the senior year.

2 While a large majority of seniors have already identified a first choice before applications are due, most are keeping their options open: on average they plan to apply to four schools.



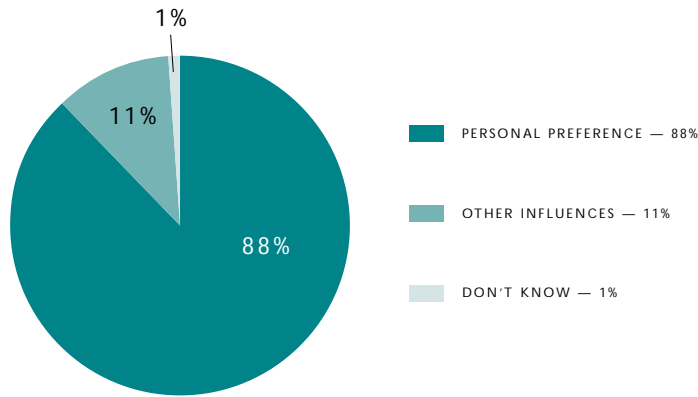
Some 70 percent of the high-ability students we surveyed plan to apply to three or more schools, and nearly 40 percent report an intention to apply to five or more institutions. On average, respondents plan to apply to four schools. Only 15 percent of students indicated they plan to apply to only one school. (Note: Since our survey was conducted before traditional application deadlines, we measured intentions, not actual applications, which may underestimate the number of applications actually filed). (Table 2)

A higher proportion of students from the Northeast (55 percent) plan to apply to five or more schools compared to those from other regions of the country (18 percent from the Midwest, 33 percent from the South, and 35 percent from the West).

3 Students' first-choice college selections are largely a matter of personal preference, and students do not frequently bow to external pressures to change their mind.

TABLE 3

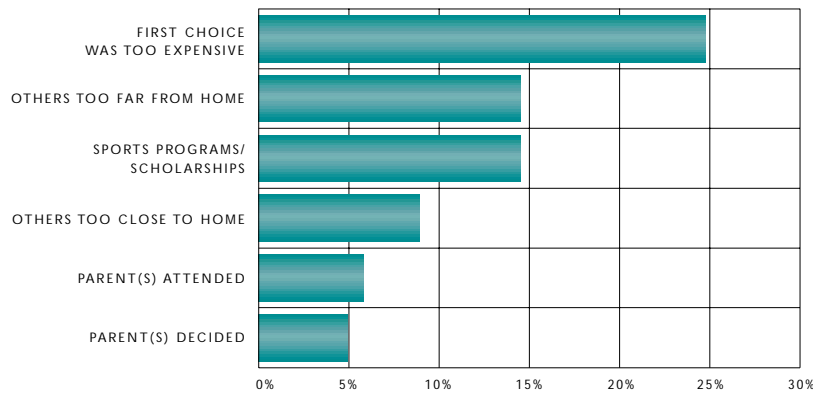
Influence of others in selecting school planning to attend



Base = Those who specified a first choice

TABLE 4

Factors influencing school planning to attend



Base = Those who specified a first choice and were influenced/pressured
 NOTE: Unaided mentions of 5% or more
 Multiple Responses Accepted

We were curious about the extent to which students might give up a first-choice selection under pressure from parents and other influences. Evidently, few students give in: 88 percent of respondents reported that their first-choice college selection was based solely on their personal preference, with no other factors or circumstances putting undue pressure on them to change their mind. (Table 3) Compared to respondents with combined SAT scores less than 1200, students with scores of 1300 and above were more likely to indicate that their first-choice selection was their personal preference, and not influenced by outside pressures (79 percent and 91 percent, respectively).

Of the 11 percent reporting that they were influenced or pressured into making a school their first choice, approximately one quarter of those said their top-choice school was too expensive or that they had not received enough financial aid. Another small number of students indicated the school was too far from home or the availability of a sports program or scholarship at another school influenced their decision. (Table 4)

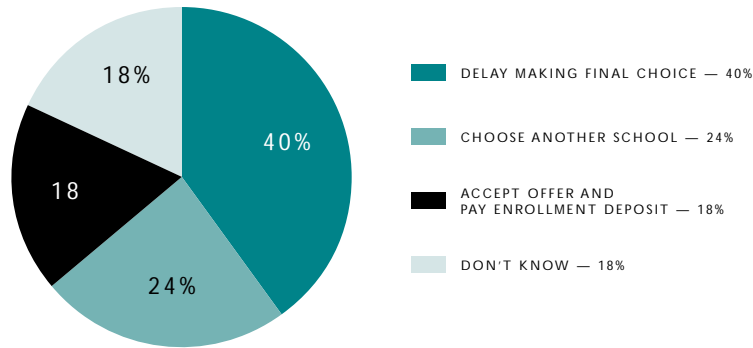
ADVISORY

Approach yield as a continuum of engagement with prospects from the first point of contact, not as an end game, last-ditch promotion.

4 A high proportion of students would delay making a final decision about which college to attend if placed on a wait list by their first-choice school.

TABLE 5

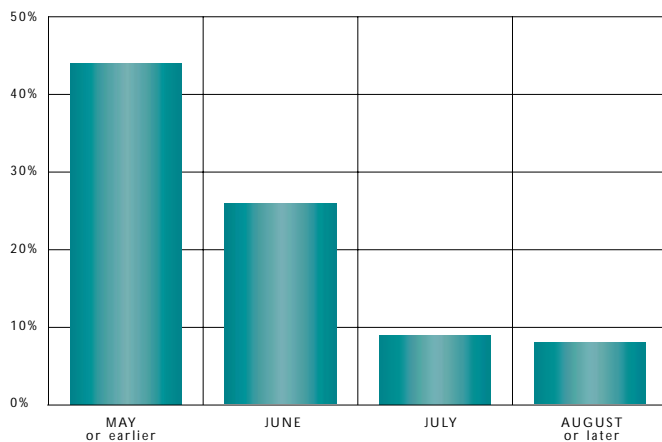
Response if put on waiting list by school planning to attend



Base = Those who specified a first choice

TABLE 6

Latest date would change mind if accepted off wait list



Base = Those who specified a first choice and would hold a place at another school

We asked those students who specified a first-choice school what they would do if the school they most wanted to attend did not admit them outright, but placed them on a waiting list. Students' commitment to their first-choice school is very strong; in fact, 40 percent of students reported they would be willing to delay making a final choice about which school to attend if placed on the wait list of their first-choice college. (Table 5)

From the list of choices we provided, nearly 20 percent of respondents indicated they would go so far as to accept another institution's offer of admission and pay an enrollment deposit with the intention of forfeiting that deposit if accepted to their first-choice institution. The mean deposit students expected to pay was \$481. Nearly one quarter of students said they would choose another school if placed on the wait list of their first-choice school, while 18 percent reported they did not know what they would do.

When we asked those students who specified a first-choice college and reported they would hold their place at another school, a significant proportion said they would be willing to wait until late spring or early summer to be admitted off the wait list of their top choice. Some 70 percent would be willing to wait until late spring or early summer before accepting another institution's offer of admissions. Forty-four percent of those students would be willing to wait until the end of May, 26 percent through June. Another 9 percent would wait until the end of July and 8 percent until the end of August. (Table 6)

5 If not accepted to their first-choice college, a high proportion of students plan to transfer to that school within two years

Our findings suggest that many students forced by default to enroll in a second-choice school begin college with the full intention of transferring to the first-choice college. Among respondents who specified a first-choice school, a sizable proportion of students surveyed (49 percent) told us that if they were not accepted to their number one choice, they would be very likely or somewhat likely to transfer to that school at a later date. (Table 7)

Students from independent/private high schools were more inclined to consider transferring to their first-choice school. Fifty-seven percent of students from private high schools indicated they were somewhat or very likely to transfer to their top-choice school, compared to 44 percent of respondents from public high schools.

We then asked respondents what they would do if they were admitted to their first-choice school, but were not happy at the school after beginning study. More than half said they would stay until the end of the first year before transferring, while 20 percent reported they would stay at least two years before transferring. Only 12 percent indicated they would stay and graduate.

The data suggest that students not accepted by their first-choice schools seem predisposed to be dissatisfied with any institution, and that those admitted to their first-choice schools have high

expectations going in and little tolerance for an institution that does not meet their needs. While we cannot predict how these attitudes would actually correlate with students' behavior once they arrived on campus, it should give colleges and universities cause for concern, particularly those institutions that are backup schools for many of their incoming students.

ADVISORY

Collect data and create analytical models to identify students for whom your institution was not a top choice. Develop strategies to involve them in campus life from their first days as freshmen.

TABLE 7

Likelihood to transfer to first choice if not initially accepted

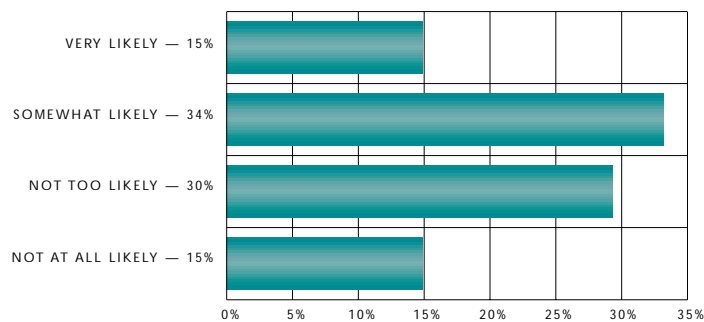
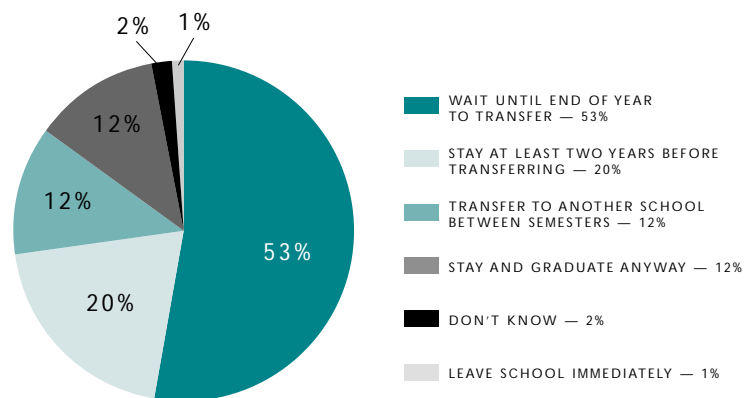


TABLE 8

Reaction if unhappy with first semester at school planning to attend



6 Rolling admissions is the most favored and precipice the least favored admissions approach.

We read students a brief description of the four basic admissions methods or approaches now in use: immediate decision, early decision, precipice admissions making offers of admission all at the same time, and rolling admissions. We then asked respondents whether they had applied to colleges using these methods and which methods were available to them among the colleges to which they applied. This enabled us to measure both the frequency of availability and use of each method. Finally, we asked respondents to rate each method.

Rolling admissions was by far the most frequently used method: some 63 percent of students were offered rolling admissions and 53 percent used it. While early decision was available to 71 percent of respondents, only 26 percent applied this way. On the other end of the scale, only 7 percent of students used the immediate decision option, due largely to the fact that only a quarter of the students polled had been offered this admissions option.

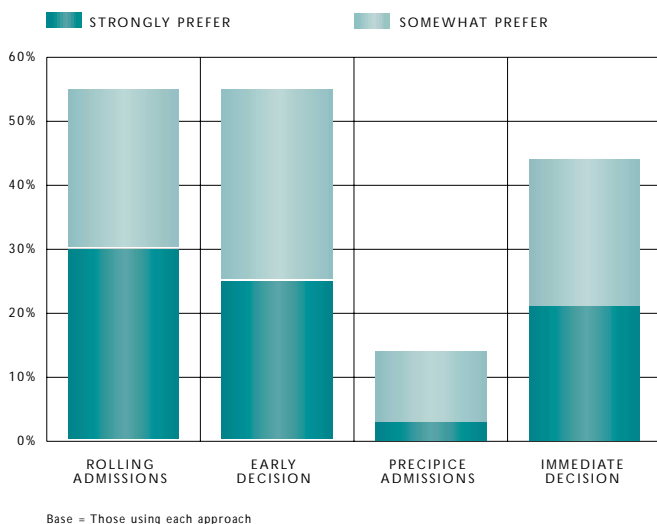
Because students were inclined to give more favorable ratings to methods they had used and less favorable ratings to methods they hadn't used, we applied statistical techniques to control for this bias. Fifty-three percent of respondents used rolling admissions at one or more schools. Of this group, 30 percent said they strongly preferred this method while an additional 25 percent somewhat preferred it. Twenty-six percent of students had used early decision, with 25 percent strongly and 30 percent somewhat preferring this method. Twenty percent used precipice admissions, but only 3 percent strongly and 11 percent somewhat preferred it. Only 8 percent used immediate decision (17 students). Twenty-one percent strongly and 23 percent somewhat preferred it. (Tables 9 and 10)

Using mean ratings to rank the desirability of each approach, rolling admission ranks as the most desirable, with precipice at the bottom.

We also asked respondents to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed that different admissions practices were associated with statements ranging from the "fairest way to admit students" to "offered by schools with a highly prestigious reputation." Majorities of respondents completely or mostly agreed that early decision and precipice admissions are offered by schools with highly prestigious reputations (70 and 62 percent, respectively). A high proportion of students completely or mostly agreed that rolling admissions: is the fairest way to admit students (59 percent); makes it easier for students to sort out their choices more carefully (80 percent); and is an admissions approach most sensitive to student needs (77 percent). Not surprisingly, 71 percent of students completely or mostly agreed that early decision puts pressure on students to make decisions earlier than they want, compared to 52 percent for immediate decision, and 45 percent for precipice admissions. Similarly, less than half of all respondents agreed that early decision makes it easier for students to sort out their choices more carefully. (Table 11)

TABLE 9

Preference for admissions alternatives



ADVISORY

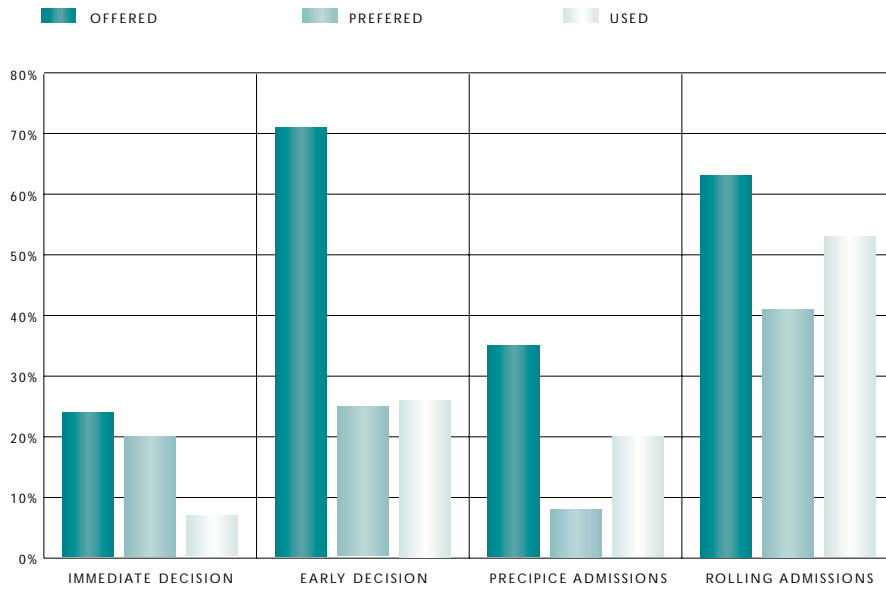
Develop a wider range of application options that students can choose based on their own preferences and needs.

Note: Below are definitions of the admissions methods tested.

- > **Early decision:** students apply in fall and are given a decision in January. Students are expected to accept offer and withdraw applications made to other schools.
- > **Immediate decision:** students bring application materials to campus or off-campus site for an on-the-spot evaluation. A non-binding decision is offered the same day.
- > **Precipice admissions:** offers of admission made to candidates at the same time — usually late March or early April.
- > **Rolling admissions:** Starting in January, students receive a decision, usually within two or three weeks after completing their application.

TABLE 10

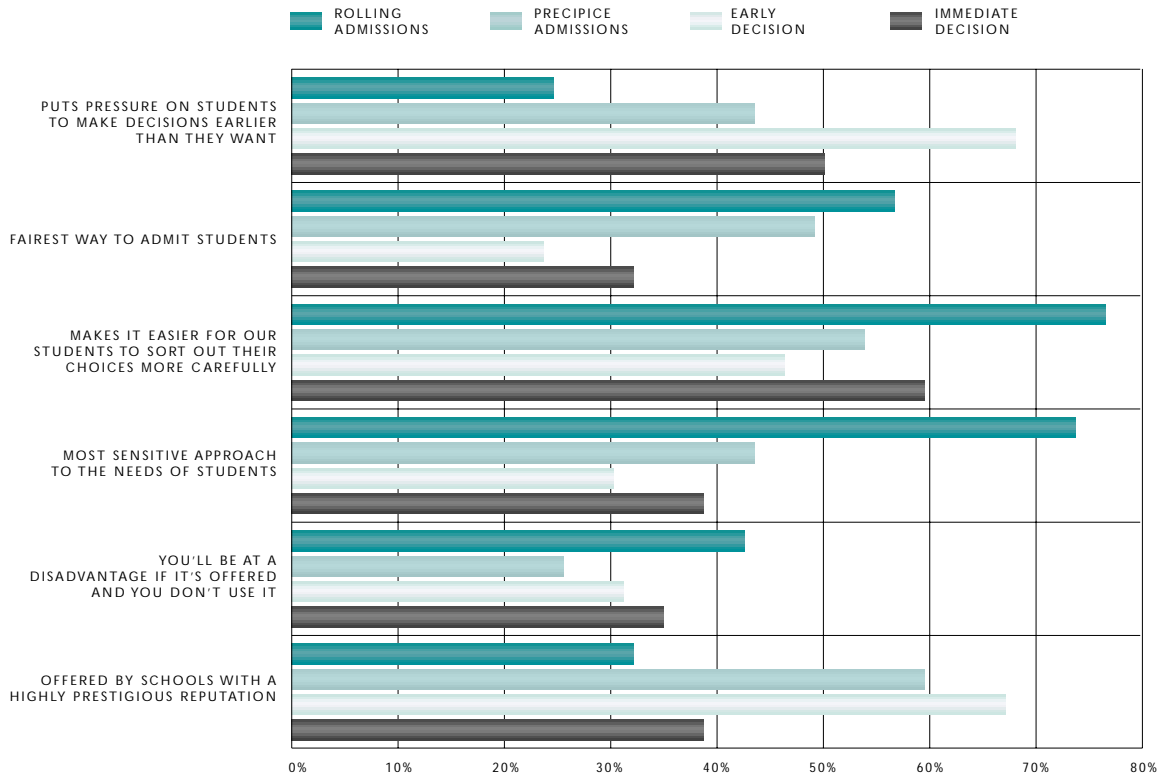
Availability and use of admissions alternatives



Base = Total Sample

TABLE 11

Perceptions of admission alternatives

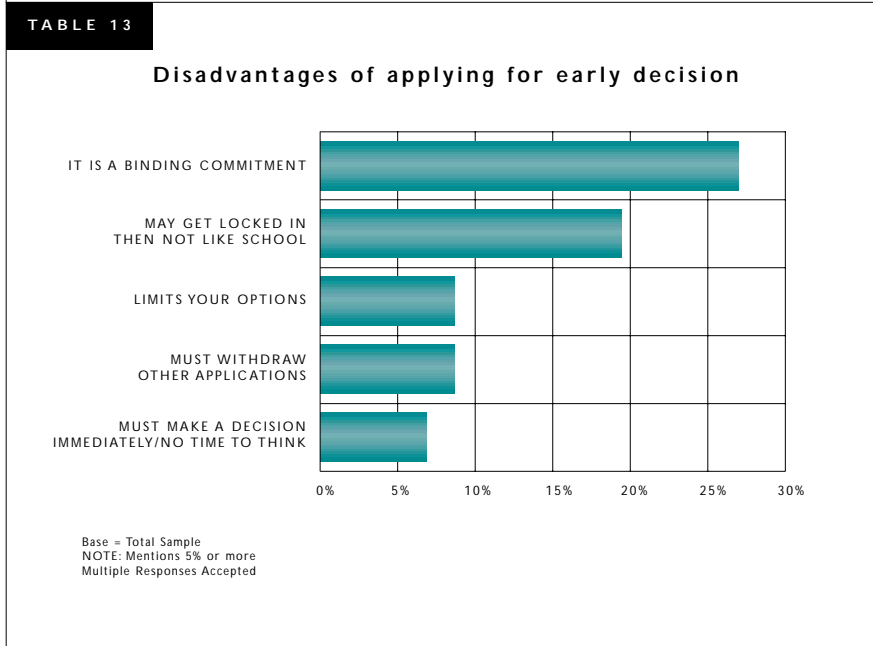
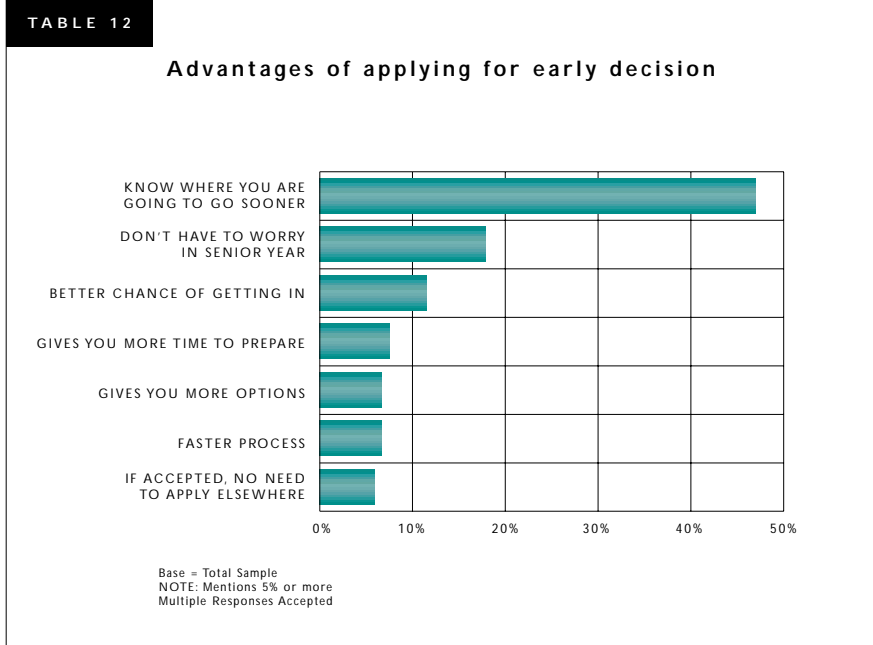


Base = Those who were asked
NOTE: Agree completely or mostly

7 Knowing earlier the college they will attend is the greatest advantage students attribute to early admission. Conversely, the binding commitment required is the greatest disadvantage.

With the growing popularity of early decision, we thought it would be useful to ask students about their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. We used an open-ended question for this purpose, then categorized the responses and analyzed those that were mentioned by 5 percent or more of respondents. There were no surprises. The majority of respondents (49 percent) thought the greatest advantage of early decision is knowing much sooner the college they will be attending. Some 18 percent of respondents reported that early decision means less worry in the senior year of high school. Supporting the anecdotal experiences of many high school counselors, 12 percent mistakenly believe that applying via early decision would improve their chance of being admitted to the college of their choice. (Table 12)

The binding commitment to a college required by early decision was seen as the greatest liability of the approach; 28 percent cited this disadvantage. Twenty percent mentioned a similar concern: committing to a college that they would subsequently decide they didn't like. (Table 13)



ADVISORY
Make it clear to prospects whether early decision does, in fact, increase or decrease their chances of admission and discourage early applications from marginal candidates.

Here are some of the interesting (and humorous) comments made by students about the advantages and disadvantages of early decision:

ADVANTAGES

“You can get a load off your mind.”

“It makes the application process cheaper.”

“If you know up front, you can save money.”

“You get the rest of the year off and a little relaxation.”

DISADVANTAGES

“If you don’t get in, you get disappointed sooner.”

“On your application, you have to put your grades and your activities and they put a lot of importance on your grades.”

“Good chance of being turned down.”

“Lots of people think once they get accepted, they can slack off on their schoolwork.”

“You have to go unless you have financial reasons and then you could be blacklisted by other colleges.”

8 For a sizable segment of students, phone calls during the admissions process heightened their interest in a school.

Increasingly, it is not uncommon for institutions to use faculty, students, alumni/ae and other individuals to contact prospective and admitted students at various stages of the admissions process. Our data from this study simply confirm previous *student*POLL findings: students place a high value on personal communication with colleges they are considering.

Some 71 percent of students surveyed reported that they were contacted by telephone during the admissions process. Of that total, 44 percent were contacted by a student, 37 percent by

an admissions counselor, 19 percent by a faculty member, and 6 percent by someone else.

Of those contacted by phone, 42 percent reported that the phone call heightened their interest in attending that college. More students in the West (61 percent) were likely to report increased interest following the phone call. While 56 percent of students indicated that the phone call did not change their interest in a school, only 2 percent reported that the call made them less interested in applying.

ADVISORY

Be sure to include a carefully designed program of telephone contact (avoid naked “telemarketing” sales pitches) that engages prospects in substantive conversations with students, faculty, and staff.

9 Many students lack knowledge about the common application and its availability at institutions they are considering.

We were curious about the extent to which students were aware of the common application and interested in using it. Our findings suggest that there are major barriers to broadening use of the common application.

Forty-five percent of students surveyed were aware that at least some of the schools to which they applied accepted the common application. However, more than half were not aware of or did not know if the schools to which they

planned to apply would accept the common application. Not surprisingly, given these results, 46 percent of all students surveyed were not interested in using the common application, 31 percent somewhat interested and only 21 percent very interested.

Among respondents who indicated they were very or somewhat interested in using the common application, nearly half (45 percent) cited less paperwork and no repetition in completing the application process as the primary reason for wanting to use it. Some 36 percent thought it would be easier to fill out, and 21 percent cited time savings as the reasons for wanting to apply to college with the common application. (Table 14)

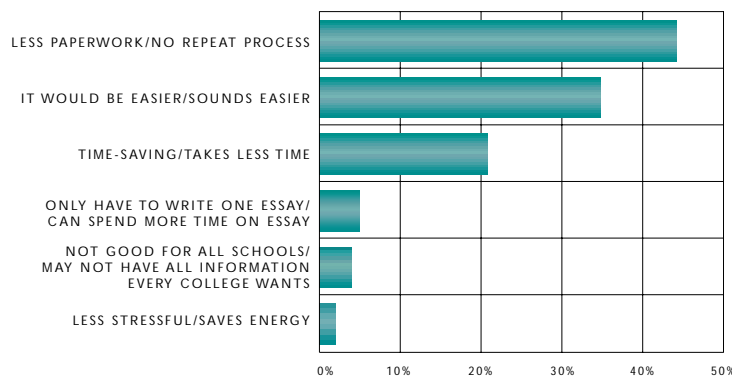
Of those who indicated they were not interested in using the common application, there were several reasons given: 21 percent said that the common application was not accepted by the schools of greatest interest to them; 14 percent said the application was not good for all schools or may not include all of the information the college of their choice requested; and 10 percent actually preferred the “custom” approach over of the standardization of the common application. (Table 15)

These findings suggest that some prospective students believe that filing the common application may reduce their chances for admission, even among the colleges that accept it and claim to give it the same consideration as the school’s “custom” application. Anecdotal evidence from high school counselors suggests that some of the colleges which make this claim are disingenuous and do, in fact, take common applications less seriously.

Our findings also suggest that a sizable number of students would be interested in using the common application if institutions offered this option and clearly communicated its availability to prospective students.

TABLE 14

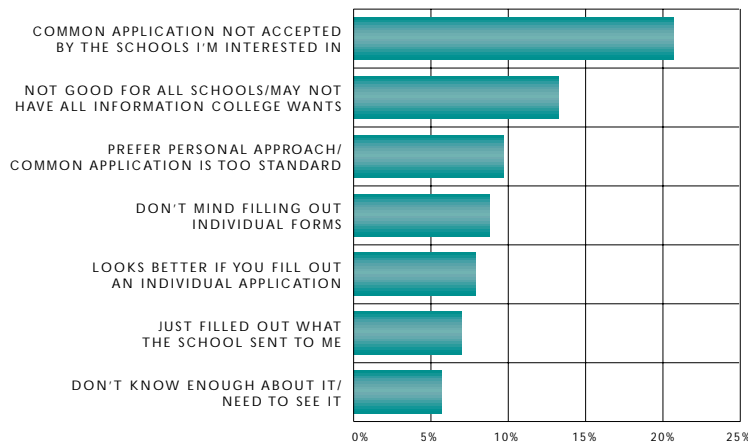
Reason for using common application



Base = Those who are very or somewhat interested in using the common application
NOTE: Mentions of 2% or more
Multiple Responses Accepted

TABLE 15

Reason for not using common application



Base = Those who are not interested in using the common application
NOTE: Mentions of 2% or more
Multiple Responses Accepted

*student*POLL is an authoritative national survey that measures the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of high-ability, college-bound high school students and their parents. Available only by subscription, it is published quarterly by Art & Science Group, Inc., leading institutional marketing consultants to higher education and the non-profit sector. Information about Art & Science Group and how to order subscriptions to *student*POLL can be found on the back cover of this report.

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SURVEY
METHODOLOGY

The findings reported in this issue of *student*POLL are based on in-depth telephone interviews with a random national sample of 500 high school seniors who plan to enroll in four-year colleges in the fall of 1998. To qualify for an interview, respondents must have achieved a combined, SATI score of 1,050 or higher. The study sample was drawn and weighted to represent the national distribution of students with qualifying SAT scores by geography, gender, intended major, and income. Questions about survey methods, findings, and other matters should be addressed to Art & Science Group, Inc.

H O T T O P I C

Students prefer that one third of the undergraduate population be comprised of students of the opposite sex at colleges they are seriously considering.

Women now comprise slightly more than half of the college-bound population and will account for a growing proportion of college enrollments. Based on current projections, women are likely to comprise 60 to 70 percent of the market for selective liberal arts colleges before the end of the decade. Given this trend, we were curious to learn the extent to which gender balance is an important factor in prospects' decisions about where to apply to college.

We surveyed both male and female students to find out the importance of gender balance in their college application decisions. Specifically, we asked them to rate the importance of a school's gender ratio in their decision about whether to apply to a particular college. We also asked them to tell us the minimum acceptable percentage of men or women, depending on their sex, that an institution would need to have in order for them to seriously consider that college.

Our findings reveal that while gender balance is not too important or not at all important to a majority of students (55 percent), some 38 percent consider it somewhat important.

At schools where women now account for 70 percent or more of the undergraduate student body, this finding should be some cause for concern. While gender balance may not be a driving factor in college choice, students surveyed do think that 30 percent is the minimum acceptable percentage of students of the opposite sex that should attend any college they seriously consider. In fact, among total respondents, the mean percentage of students they expect to find of the opposite sex at a college is 33 percent.

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