

Breaking the 'Cruel Cycle of Selectivity' in Admissions

Joyce Hesselberth for The Chronicle

[Enlarge Image](#)

Joyce Hesselberth for The Chronicle

By Jerome A. Lucido

In pursuit of revenue and prestige, colleges have ramped up their marketing machines. Many now generate thousands more applications than are needed to select an economically viable and talented freshman class. An explosion in rejection letters has matched the explosion in applications as students vie to enter ever-more-selective institutions. Both students and colleges are caught up in a "cruel cycle of selectivity," as Eric Hoover rightly described the process [in a recent article in *The Chronicle*](#).

For students, the cruel cycle means making choices in high school on the basis of what they believe college-admissions officers will want to see rather than on the basis of a personal quest for knowledge, self-understanding, and self-reliance. It means filing more applications and paying more application fees because the outcome of the admission process is increasingly in doubt. For those who can afford it, it means spending hours in test-prep classes and working with personal counselors who are paid to tailor and refine their applications. It also means that many students who come from families without college experience feel that college is unattainable. Sadly, this comes at precisely the time that the nation needs those students to aspire to and prepare for success in higher education.

For colleges, the cycle is a relentless drive for status, prestige, and revenue, in which the metrics are unequivocal: Applications must increase, test scores must rise, acceptance rates must fall, and enough full payers must attend to finance the institution's goals and aspirations. Nearly all colleges use extensive direct-mail and electronic marketing, and many are adding recruiters and sending them abroad in pursuit of new markets. Others employ direct-mail "fast applications," promulgate early-admission plans, and engage in financial-aid leveraging that can adversely affect socioeconomic diversity. Still others hire consulting firms to do the strategic marketing for them.

Meanwhile, the nation's demographics amply demonstrate that few institutions can post gains across each of those metrics, certainly not without leaving out most low-income and minority students, and not without directing attention away from the nation's dire need for greater degree attainment.

College and university leaders—trustees, presidents, chief academic officers—have the unenviable responsibility of ensuring their institutions' continued financial viability while

pursuing increasingly ambitious academic missions. In this pursuit, their strong turn to the competitive marketplace is understandable. But it is also clear that more is happening here. There is an insatiable appetite for prestige and status that accompanies the drive for revenues. What we see now is that marketplace competition has escalated to the point at which it threatens to become the mission rather than to serve the mission. And for what gain?

An institution can achieve short-term market advantage through aggressive marketing, but in due time competitors will match and then surpass that edge. The escalating competition raises institutional costs, invariably resulting in higher tuition and a greater need to admit students whose families can pay full price.

While some institutions can handle the added expense, there are broader costs that no college can handle alone. As numerous scholars have documented, zealous pursuit of institutional interest has come at the expense of social goals and the public trust. Moreover, there is a loss of educational values, a loss that we cannot afford. One effect of our pursuit of rankings and prestige has been to change how students view college. No longer seen as the crucial capstone of an educational journey, a degree is now regarded as a ticket to economic advantage. Students and institutions alike, it seems, are branding themselves in pursuit of positioning.

The needs of the nation and the realities of the marketplace require us to approach college admissions with metrics that encourage competition in areas that really matter and in ways that send strong educational messages to students, families, governments—and ourselves. Call it practical idealism. Here are a few of those metrics:

The lives we have changed; the families we have changed: How many first-generation students have we recruited, matriculated, nurtured, and graduated? How many low-income students?

The ways we have developed the students entrusted to us: What knowledge have they gained? What habits of mind have they developed? What skills have they mastered in the application of their newfound knowledge and habits of mind?

Student participation in and benefit from the elements of our programs that we promote: How many and what proportion have international experiences, engage in research, serve the community, pursue interdisciplinary study, receive individualized advising?

Faculty evaluations of our students' intellectual curiosity, vitality, and perspectives: Do they think, write, and speak critically, nimbly, and effectively? Do they demonstrate a keen interest in learning? Do they stimulate the thinking of one another and their instructors?

Student evaluations of the intellectual depth, inquisitive nature, developmental approach, and perspectives of our faculty: Do professors demonstrate a keen interest in the subject matter? Do they communicate it meaningfully and well? Do they provide methods and encouragement for each student to master it?

Other key metrics, similarly treated, include the number and percentage of students who complete their programs, and the extent to which our students (and their families, their employers, and their communities) attribute their growth to us.

Competing on those grounds would elevate higher education through the messages we send, the way we evaluate candidates, the results we produce, and the service we provide. It would permit us to reclaim lost public trust and to regenerate our educational values. As an added benefit, improvements in these areas would influence and strengthen elementary and secondary education by stimulating enlightened curriculum and instruction and by engendering higher aspirations among a wider representation of students.

The pressure on deans and directors of admission and enrollment to "meet their numbers" is enormous. The recommended set of "new numbers" will spread the pressure across the campus in educationally productive ways. But to do so, they must be adopted, promoted, and rewarded by trustees, presidents, and provosts.

With that in mind, this month, in partnership with the Education Conservancy, the University of Southern California's Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice will hold a national forum, "The Case for Change in College Admissions," to address what is right, what is wrong, and what must be changed. We must act collectively to identify a new framework for college admissions, one that will allow those leaders to chart a more productive way toward prestige, popularity, and revenue.

Jerome A. Lucido is a professor of research and executive director of the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice in the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California.