Thursday, October 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2014

Holistic review and the Common Application

The theme for this afternoon’s meeting is \textit{telling your story}. There will be a number of discussions that will follow related to this theme. But let me reference some news released just last week, which will bring this all into context.

You may have heard that \textit{The Common Application} has announced that it is no longer requiring its members to conduct holistic review. Essentially what that means is that, hereafter; \textit{The Common Application} will not require its members to require admissions essays or recommendations to join the currently 549 institutions that accept \textit{The Common Application}. Paul Mott, the Common App’s interim chief executive officer, has said that feedback from admissions officers and high-school counselors had persuaded the organization’s Board of Directors to make the change saying “Our membership has said unequivocally that we must do more to increase access and this is reducing these barriers to access and pointless friction.”

I understand that the justification being provided by \textit{The Common Application} is being attributed to an argument in favor of providing greater access and being more inclusive. However, personally, I find that incredibly ironic. Typically justifications for simplifying the admissions process allege that they are trying to make it easier for students and the counselors that serve them. Often such arguments will suggest that requiring essays, or letters of recommendation, creates a greater burden for the poor and otherwise disenfranchised. Besides my finding that a specious, patronizing, and insulting justification, it is my personal opinion that the movement away from holistic review will actually reduce student access.

Eliminating holistic review removes the number of things that can be considered in the admissions process. Definitely it will speed up and simplify the process of reviewing applications as it will eliminate the need to review essays and read letters of recommendation; often those some of the most timely parts of the application review process. Accordingly, it will make the application process even
more quantitative in nature by eliminating most of the qualitative aspects. So what that means is that admissions decisions will increasingly be made on the basis of numbers alone. Most of what admissions offices have to work with will be just SAT or ACT scores, and grade point average. And, with many high school students we won’t even have rank in class to consider, because increasingly high schools have stopped providing rank in class, flawed as that often is because there is no consistency in how it’s provided. And, with “score choice”, often we only get to see one set of test scores.

Now, provided transcripts continue to be required, hopefully many colleges will still continue to evaluate students on a course by course basis. Because grade point average alone doesn’t tell us anything. Many students with 3.5 gpas are far better prepared, more motivated, and harder workers than students with higher grade point averages who have taken easier courses. A grade point average alone doesn’t tell us how prepared you are; we need to see the courses that you have taken, and your performance in each one of them, to determine whether you are prepared. We need to see how much mathematics, how much lab science, and how much foreign language have you taken. Have you taken AP English literature and American history? A grade point average alone doesn’t tell us that.

Grade point average alone doesn’t tell us whether you are slacking off or whether you have now matured, are in your academic stride and are now committed to making the most of your academic opportunities. We need to start with a course by course review of your application in order to attempt to try to determine that.

But then, the transcript, alone, doesn’t tell us your story. And, the SAT and the ACT certainly don’t. Because for decades it has been repeatedly proven that family income has the greatest correlation to performance on those tests. And after family income it’s parental level of education. And after that, it’s ethnicity and other social and environmental causes. SAT and ACT scores don’t tell us whether you are prepared; SAT and ACT scores don’t tell us whether you are motivated.

It truly troubles me that The Common Application is now abandoning its long standing commitment to holistic review. However, let me assure you that Saint
Mary’s College of California hasn’t. Saint Mary’s College *remains* committed to holistic review.

This is because we can’t understand what a student’s numbers mean unless we know her story. Her story provides us with a road map in trying to understand her numbers.

Reading essays and letters of recommendation can tell us whether a student had to move three times. Or whether her grandfather died in her sophomore year, explaining that year’s second semester decline. Or whether her parents divorced, her sister is a recovering drug addict, or her father lost his job. Or perhaps something less painful, but real, such as whether she got mononucleosis, or she broke her leg playing sports, or was in a car accident. Perhaps her performance in English and the SAT reflects that her parents immigrated from the Philippines, and that while at school she seems fluent in English at home she only speaks Tagalog with them and her grandparents, and often has to serve as a their translator when they are dealing with the electric company or bank. A grade point average alone, SAT scores alone, or even a careful review of the transcript doesn’t tell us that. We need to know her story in order to understand the numbers.

Unfortunately, without an essay or letters of recommendation, we are unlikely to know her story. We will be unable to know whether her numbers tell us how really prepared she is, or how motivated she might be.

Abandoning holistic review won’t increase access. It will reduce it. Because the people with the highest numbers are the ones with the fewest bumps in the road; the ones who are historically advantaged. The affluent; the children of college graduates; and yes—and this is coming from a white man-- European Americans. Eliminating holistic review will advantage the already well advantaged *haves*, at the expense of the *have nots*. And it breaks my heart.

Saint Mary’s College is, and will remain, committed to holistic review.

*Michael K. McKeon/Remarks at the College Board Update/Saint Mary’s College of California/September 23, 2014*