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Dramatic Increases in College Applications

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of freshman applications. Notably, the University of California had an overall increase of 2.4 % in freshman applicants and a 17.5% increase in transfer applicants over the prior year. These increases are particularly troubling because they are accompanied by a targeted 1500 student reduction in overall freshmen enrollment for Fall 2010.

Since most admissions experts had predicted that the economic downturn would result in lower numbers of college applications, the surge puzzled most everyone in college admissions. Puzzlement soon gave way to hypotheses about how to interpret the increases. The most commonly accepted explanation appears to be what many have labeled the "flight to quality." An interesting byproduct of the economic downturn, "flight to quality" describes students' push to improve their job and career prospects by getting into college, specifically the best undergraduate or professional program to which they can gain admission. One counselor summed it up by stating "Students are reaching out for the best university to which they can be admitted. It would appear that even in a down economy, families are prepared to pay a premium to help their children attend a good college. Education is still viewed as a sound investment strategy."

A different but related question is whether parents and their students should be concerned with the surge? There seems to be a good deal of anxiety over the increased numbers and many wonder if they have overinflated expectations for admission to top colleges. Based on early numbers, my response is, "It depends." If a student hopes to gain admission to a super-selective college and clearly has the qualifications to attend such a school, then there is no pressing reason to scale back expectations. However, if a student is stretching beyond the admissions criteria, it is important to be realistic and bear in mind that the increase in applications this year

If I could select a pithy phrase to characterize the college admissions cycle for the Class of 2010, I would choose "More applications, but not more admissions." Nearly all selective colleges have reported increases in applications starting with the early application cycle. For example, Brown University's admissions office reported a 20% increase in early applications. Duke, Northwestern, Cornell, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and many others experienced a similar rise. Although the rise was evident at most colleges nationwide, the undergraduate admissions departments at colleges that rank as the most selective (and often most expensive) were caught off guard. For example, The New York Times (December 18, 2009) reported that Duke University hired more admissions officers to handle the overload and expected to accept a smaller percentage of applicants over last year, when they admitted 19%. Duke's admissions rate will drop to about 15% this year. It is important to bear in mind that this decrease is due to the increase in the number of applications, not an increase in selectivity on the part of colleges. When the number of freshman seats remain the same and the number of applications increase, the admit rate must fall.

The increase in early applications was documented for both early decision, which is binding, and for early action, which is non-binding. The increase for both programs is especially noteworthy because a binding program requires students to withdraw all other applications and, if admitted, attend that institution. Effectively, this removes the student's opportunity to review financial aid awards from other schools that might have offered admission during the regular admit cycle. Historically, affluent families were more likely to pursue the early decision option because, presumably, wealthier families can afford to forgo the benefit of comparing offers of financial assistance from different colleges. This rule of thumb appears to have failed this year. The fear of not "getting in" seems to have overridden the good judgment inherent in waiting to compare financial aid offers. And this in an economic downturn!

As the fall and early winter months progressed, surges in college applicants were reported nationwide for the regular admission cycle. The numbers of applications to some of the most selective private colleges, including most of the Ivy League schools, set records. Public institutions nationwide also reported increases in the numbers

does signal an increasingly competitive environment for college admissions. Generally speaking, in any admissions cycle it is always wise to develop a balanced list of colleges to apply to-and each school on the list should be one that the student would be pleased to attend. This approach reduces disappointments and opens opportunities.

The advice I give frequently bears repeating: if you focus on the 50 most selective colleges in the country you may well be headed for disappointment. More importantly, you will miss the chance to explore opportunities at the remaining 2,950 four-year colleges in the United States that accept the majority of their applicants. Many of these schools provide as good and often better quality of education than name brand institutions.

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