

University as a Design Problem Final Project: Inequity in Undergraduate Admissions

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Abstract

The university admissions system is under scrutiny for perpetuating systemic inequities and lacking transparency. For a long time, universities and students have been prioritizing prestige over purpose. This paper explores emerging alternatives and reform models that challenge the traditional framework of the admissions process. By examining case studies such as the CSU automatic admissions policy and St. John's College's narrative-driven process, this essay finds actionable approaches that prioritize access, fit, and mission alignment. It will also look at major disruptors that are reshaping admissions, like test-optional policies, artificial intelligence, and the right wing shift in US politics. This essay will also highlight 5 main principles: equity, transparency, fit over prestige, purpose-driven admissions, and social responsibility. Ultimately, this essay will argue that real and lasting reform requires universities to reimagine what qualifies as merit and who they are choosing to educate and serve.

Every year, according to the US News and World Report, college students must submit their personal information, transcripts, standardized test scores (typically SAT and ACT), personal statement, a slew of recommendation letters, and, very importantly, application fees to colleges around the US in hopes of receiving an acceptance letter in return (Cole Claybourn). Currently, most universities assess applicants via a “holistic” process (Claybourn). Universities admissions try to rate each applicant based on a rubric that assesses the following, “GPA, Course Rigor, Standardized Test Scores, Extracurricular Activities, Recommendation Letters, Strength of School, Essays, and Demonstrated Interest” (Ivywise). Once submitted, students must wait as 18 years of work is assessed by faceless admissions boards in hope that they will be chosen for admission.

H1: The Problem of University Admissions.

But a major issue arises when considering who is being admitted into universities across the US. According to Orentlicher’s articles on admissions reform, he states that students from low-income and highly-disadvantaged environments are on mass impeded from access to higher education (Orentlicher). He expands in his article, ““high-disadvantage” communities that suffer from high rates of poverty, low-performing schools, high levels of unemployment and crime,... diminished cognitive skills, reduced high school graduation rates, and downward economic mobility.” all of this leading to exclusion in higher education (Orentlicher). It’s these problems, he argues, that are then exacerbated in our current admissions process. So a major question is “why is the dominant paradigm failing?” Higher education as an institution has always favored students from high income families. Students in high income families go to better funded schools and are offered more resources and support (Mikhail Zinshteyn). And looking at graduation rates the statistics are telling. Students from households that earned less than \$35,000—the lowest

quarter—represented just 10 percent of all the degrees awarded (Mikhail Zinshteyn). 24-year-olds from the top two groups accounted for 77 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded in 2014. Compared to 72% from 1970 (Mikhail Zinshteyn).

The U.S. college admissions process perpetuates systemic inequities by favoring students with wealth and access to resources, demanding a paradigm shift toward equity, mission-driven evaluation, and inclusivity. While universities use a holistic review process in hopes of fairness, data shows that students from low-income families continue to be underrepresented in higher education. Meanwhile students from wealthier families dominate bachelor's degree programs.

Why is this a Wicked Problem:

There are several reasons why the holistic approach has become a wicked problem for college admissions. First, there is **no one-size-fits-all answer**. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are around 1400 universities in the US that are accredited and offer 4-year degrees (Josh Moody). These universities vary in size, mission, and values, so reforms that work in one place might not work in another. Despite the large variety of universities, most of them follow the same set of holistic admissions requirements and practices across the board.

Second, equitable admissions processes are a wicked problem because they are **hard to measure success**. What complicates the issue with admissions equity is that there's no agreed-upon definition of terms "fair" or "equitable." This problem begs questions like, "How are we measuring success in equity?" "Who makes up an equitable environment?" In tandem with the "no-one size fits all answer" the outcomes of the admissions system are hard to assess and compare.

Third, inequity in the admissions process is **a symptom of another problem to larger systems**. The admissions issue is a symptom of broader structural inequalities. Like those

mentioned by Orentlicher, Hess reaffirms this argument that larger issues like income gaps, uneven K–12 education, zip-code that a student grew up in, and rising tuition have great influence on someone’s access to higher education (Abigail Johnson Hess).

Fourth, **explanation determines the problem’s resolution**. Universities may benefit from the current system. There is a monetary benefit if universities make an effort to attract wealthy students and maintain prestige (**Orentlicher**). Another thing to consider is that it is easy to have students have one standard practice for admissions. Standardized processes, like Common App, CSU portal, SUNY portals, etc. make applications much more streamlined and easier for applicants. Students will typically only put in the extra effort if it's one of their top choice universities. Maintaining this status quo benefits the universities thus discouraging reform.

And lastly, **every solution creates new problems**. For admissions, changing one part of the system can unintentionally disadvantage other groups or reduce clarity for applicants. Dismantling or redesigning the standard system will create more confusion and possibly disadvantage students of lower income or whose families don’t have a history of higher education. The impacts from removing standardized testing requirements display these unintended consequences. The National Bureau of Economic Research has found that university admissions began favoring students of higher economic status at a higher rate than it did when requiring SAT/ACT scores, showing how possible solutions can carry negative impacts.

H2: Emerging and Alternative paradigms

The alternative paradigms that must arise to make admissions more equitable must utilize several leverage points. The leverage points that should be focused on are “9. Constants, parameters, and numbers, 2. The goals of the system, and 1. The mindset or culture of the

system.” Leveraging changes in parameters and numbers would be most reflected in university specialization. Currently, many universities are focused on mass appeal for undergrad recruitment. They do this by promoting a wide variety of majors, different economic incentives (Leonhardt) and funding gyms, sports programs, and recreational areas. Rather, universities should highlight specific academic programs, teaching styles, and education missions. Another way to leverage parameters and numbers is by developing alternative admissions processes. As will be discussed in the next section, several universities are looking at alternatives to the current holistic admissions processes. This would require universities to shift from uniform systems to flexible and equitable models. But what should continue to grow is processes like automatic admissions based on GPA, class rank, discussion-based interviews, holistic evaluations without test scores, or experience-focused applications.

Concurrently, changes in admissions would have to leverage the goals of the system and its mindset and culture. And this requires change both from universities and prospective students. This mindset shift should move from competition and prestige to fit and purpose. Students should be encouraged to apply more thoughtfully, selecting colleges based on academic fit, pedagogy, environment, and affordability, rather than just prestige or fear of rejection. It would make most sense if students picked universities that were an appropriate fit for their interested degree path, pedagogy style, environment, and, importantly, price. Hopefully, competition would decrease and students' success and satisfaction would rise.

Additionally, there are cultural changes that the universities need to make as well. As mentioned before, the high rate of applications means they can cherry pick students to attend their universities. Universities could be picking students that would be paying more. The University of California system has had pressure from California legislatures to increase the

percentage of incoming freshmen that are California residents. For about 20 years, the UC system has steadily decreased the amount of California residents they accepted. Out of state students pay a higher cost than in-state students. (Emma Gallegos/Ed Source). While they haven't admitted this, the presumption is that they would prefer to have students that pay more. Secondly, universities would have to shift into coming up with specific goals and pedagogy for their students. They need to be distinguished based on academics and programs over student lifestyle and non-academic services. This would follow the model of most graduate program admissions. Subsequently, universities should shift into a system that keys into specific students they want to attract. This could ultimately lead to less expense on marketing and non-academic spending that is used to pull in a wide array of students.

Lastly, there needs to be a shift in the admissions processes from opacity to transparency and trust. There is a current lack of trust people have in universities. The decline in trust has some connection to Covid-19 restrictions. According to Pew Research, "trust in scientists dropped from 87 percent at the beginning of the pandemic to 73 percent in 2023. The percentage of people who claimed little or no trust in scientists jumped from 12 to 27 percent over the same span." (Michael Saunders). One way for universities to tackle issues of opacity is to create better avenues for transparency in the admissions process. One strategy would be to offer opportunities for feedback for applicants. If students are rejected they will have an understanding of why that decision was made. That way they could have better strategies for how to be a better applicant in the future either for themselves or younger applicants coming in after them.

H3: Seeds of Change and Institutional Models

Several universities have begun creating different models for the admissions process. The following are several examples of different universities that have admissions models that vary

from the typical “holistic” model. First there are several university systems that have automatic acceptance. Two examples of this are the California State Universities and University of Texas system. Regarding California State Universities (CSU), California high school students that achieve a 3.0 GPA are automatically accepted into 8-10 schools in the CSU system (Mikhail Zinshteyn). The following Universities include, Channel Islands, Chico, East Bay, Humboldt, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay, San Bernardino, San Francisco, San Marcos, and Sonoma (The California State University). With the exception of Maritime, the CSU’s involved in this program are Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) (California State Universities Fact Sheet). Students don’t have to pay for an application and the CSU system is prioritizing its local students. Similarly, The University of Texas System has its OnRamps program. The OnRamps program is available for local Texas students. It is a dual enrollment program that allows students to take college courses and earn college credits. Students that participate in the program are automatically accepted to the University of Texas System (OnRamps)

Another change occurring is a growing popularity in creating alternative admissions processes. Highlighting two universities that are creating different models are St. John’s College and Minerva University. St. John’s has two application types. The first is a traditional “holistic” application where students enter their application materials into a portal. The second is a discussion-based application (St. John’s College). The discussion-based model includes three main criteria that prospective students participate in: Interviews, Seminars, and a Graded Paper. The university explains this process with the following, “[Students] register for an interview with an admissions counselor, an interview with a faculty member, and participate in an online seminar designed for future students (this requirement can also be met by participating in Summer Academy).” (St. John’s College). While this admissions model is more labor intensive,

St. John's College shows that it is focused on understanding the individual on a deeper level with this narrative-driven process.

Regarding Minerva University, its Mission of Admissions states, "In our admissions process, we carefully assess every aspect of each applicant's profile. Our goal is to cultivate a dynamic student body that embraces a wide array of perspectives." (Minerva University). Minerva offers a free application which focuses on experiences and passions. Its own holistic process examines, "who you are, how you think, and what you'll achieve" and submitting test scores is optional. (Minerva University). In regards to the positives, the free application makes this process more accessible than most and Minerva is focused on enrolling a very specific kind of student and emphasizes its commitment to not consider income (Minerva University). On the other hand, Minerva establishes itself by prestige and has very low admissions rates, so a vast majority of applicants will be rejected.

The last thing to touch on is the growing trend of schools going test optional. This is an interesting course of action for achieving more equitable practices. Test-optional means that schools are not requiring students to submit SAT/ACT scores. Due to testing restraints that occurred because of the COVID pandemic, many universities decided to become test-optional. But after several years of going test-optional, there are some concerns with how equitable this practice is. In 2020 the University of California (UC) Board of Regents decided to remove the SAT/ACT testing requirements. According to the UC office of the President, test scores could not be calculated for admissions but could help with course placement once accepted. Further they decided that in 2021, they would begin creating their own standardized test specifically for UC applicants. In another example Georgetown University tried to go test-optional. Again, due to Covid shutdowns, Georgetown decided to become test optional. They recently decided to

reinstate their requirement for test scores, making SAT/ACT score submissions mandatory. In their statement they released on March 27th, they referenced, “National Bureau of Economic Research found that for selective universities, making test scores optional disproportionately harms students from poorly-resourced high schools.” (Georgetown - University News).

H3: Disruptors Affecting the Admissions Landscape

Looking at the current state of affairs, it is pertinent to look at possible major disruptors that have and will impact the university admissions process. One of the most influential disruptors has been the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns. The covid-19 pandemic changed many aspects of higher education. Its major impact on college applications was that many universities and universities systems changed to test-optional. This means that students didn't have to submit scores for the SAT or ACT to specific colleges they were applying to. This was due to many testing sessions being cancelled for months during covid and some concerns about new “At-home E-SAT” (Erin Orbey). The College Board has made a lot of changes to the SAT since Covid shut downs. In 2020, they streamlined their computer based SAT, “eSAT.” They also did this with AP tests as well. They created an at-home version for both types of tests but due to many technical issues many students' scores were voided and the at-home system was discontinued. (Erin Orbey).

A second disruptor to consider is the encroaching usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in admissions. Higher education, like most things, will be disrupted by AI use. Many employers use AI models for assessing applicants and it would make sense that this is the path for university admissions departments. Many universities currently are using AI models to assess and rate applicants (Ivy Central). With the emergence of AI, it is important to consider its possible impacts. Regarding transparency, applicants might wonder how AI is being used, what it's

filtering for and how it's learning algorithms work. On top of that AI could give applicants feedback on the results of their application. One major concern of using AI in the admissions process is it might homogenize the student body. An important question to think about with AI is what or who's being discounted when admissions use AI algorithms? If it's filtering on major parameters it might be disqualifying competitive candidates that don't fit a particular mold.

Lastly, shifting politics and the current US administration will greatly impact many aspects of higher education. A changing political landscape in the US might allow some drastic changes for higher ed. There are three things I want to consider for this possible disruptor. First, in regards to cultural discourse, there seems to be a breaking point for high tuition. There has been a slight decline in tuition prices and college attendance is dropping. In 2022 only 62% of students went to college straight from high school. This is an 8% drop from 6 years prior (Jon Marcus). With a drop in attendance, universities are at risk for closure and so are many departments. Universities will have to make a shift to continue being competitive and prove that they are an educational asset to possible applicants. The second disruptor is an anti-intellectual movement. There is a current lack of trust people have in universities. The decline in trust has some connection to Covid-19 restrictions. According to Pew Research, "trust in scientists dropped from 87 percent at the beginning of the pandemic to 73 percent in 2023. The percentage of people who claimed little or no trust in scientists jumped from 12 to 27 percent over the same span." (Michael Saunders). Thirdly, following off the heels of the last point, the current administration is focused on divestment in education at a federal level. We see this in the steady dissolution of the Department of Education and ending of DEI programs at universities. The federal government has threatened universities' funding if they don't "get in line" with new conservative values of the administration.

What kinds of interventions are needed?

Next thing to consider is what interventions are needed in order to create a new equitable paradigm. This includes shifting student mindsets and university incentives, reimagining student mindsets, targeted recruitment and focus on the local community, and increased transparency. The first necessary intervention is reimagining student mindsets, which would need to change to being more considerate or discerning of where they are applying. The high competitiveness of college applications lead to students mass applying out of fear of rejection. For many, the worst case scenario is not getting accepted into any university. Students should be guided to apply with intention, focusing on schools that match their academic interests, learning style, campus culture, and financial needs, not just brand name or selectivity. In the future, students will choose colleges that genuinely suit their goals, values, and budgets. This shift will hopefully empower students to take ownership of their educational journeys rather than conforming to outdated measures of prestige.

Regarding the shifting university incentives, universities need to incentivize prioritizing academics and student success over amenities. Universities spend a lot of money on lifestyle amenities as a way of recruitment. In doing this, universities become status symbols for students who attend. Adjusting the paradigm to refocus on educational prestige may incentivize a more equitable group of students to apply and be accepted. On top of this change, universities need to design admissions processes to reflect specific educational missions rather than focus on broad appeal. This would be aligned with what Minerva is doing in regards to their recruitment and admissions.

Looking further at recruitment, universities need to continue to focus on targeted recruitment and serving their local communities. Universities should focus on recruiting students

based on academic fit and geographic ties, possibly prioritizing in-state or local students. Part of working on targeting recruitment means that it is necessary for universities to fine tune their academic goal. Like mentioned previously in the section above, refining focus on both academic mission, program, and research would lead to a refined student applicant pool. An important element of this is seeing a focus on local communities. A measure that is currently being implemented is the use of local admissions representatives to bring positive change if their role was expanded. Ideally, having admissions counselors work with high school students years before they begin applying to help them prepare for applications could benefit local communities. Both recruitment from local students but also focusing the missions and programs to fit the communities' needs.

Lastly, as mentioned above, an important intervention is to create a culture of transparency. For many good reasons, admissions processes are fairly secretive, but this leads to students having trouble understanding the best way to be successful when applying for colleges. Universities should clarify how decisions are made, especially when AI or algorithms are used in the admissions process. In addition, universities should have some system of feedback for students so that they have a better understanding of a university's decision.

Ultimately, these interventions should focus on creating equity-focused practices for admissions processes. Universities should reduce reliance on standardized tests like the SAT/ACT and find other avenues to assess students in other objective manners. Ideally ones that align specifically to a university's mission.

Universities should consider creating alternative application methods that focus on holistic and focused admissions practices, like St. John's College. In the long run, design policies

should uplift marginalized and low-income students and eliminate systemic barriers like costly prep, elite school access, and over-emphasis on high test scores.

Principles to Drive Change

To summarize, the university admissions process needs broader change than just changing testing and application requirements. True change demands a bold commitment to equity, transparency, and accountability. A truly equitable admissions process centers on genuine fit between students and institution, guided by each college's mission and values. Admissions must be purpose-driven and prioritize the social responsibility of higher education. Universities must work to cultivate a diverse and ethically focused student body. By shifting the focus from competition and prestige to community, and from gatekeeping to opportunity, the higher education system can build an admissions process that equitably serves the broader public.

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