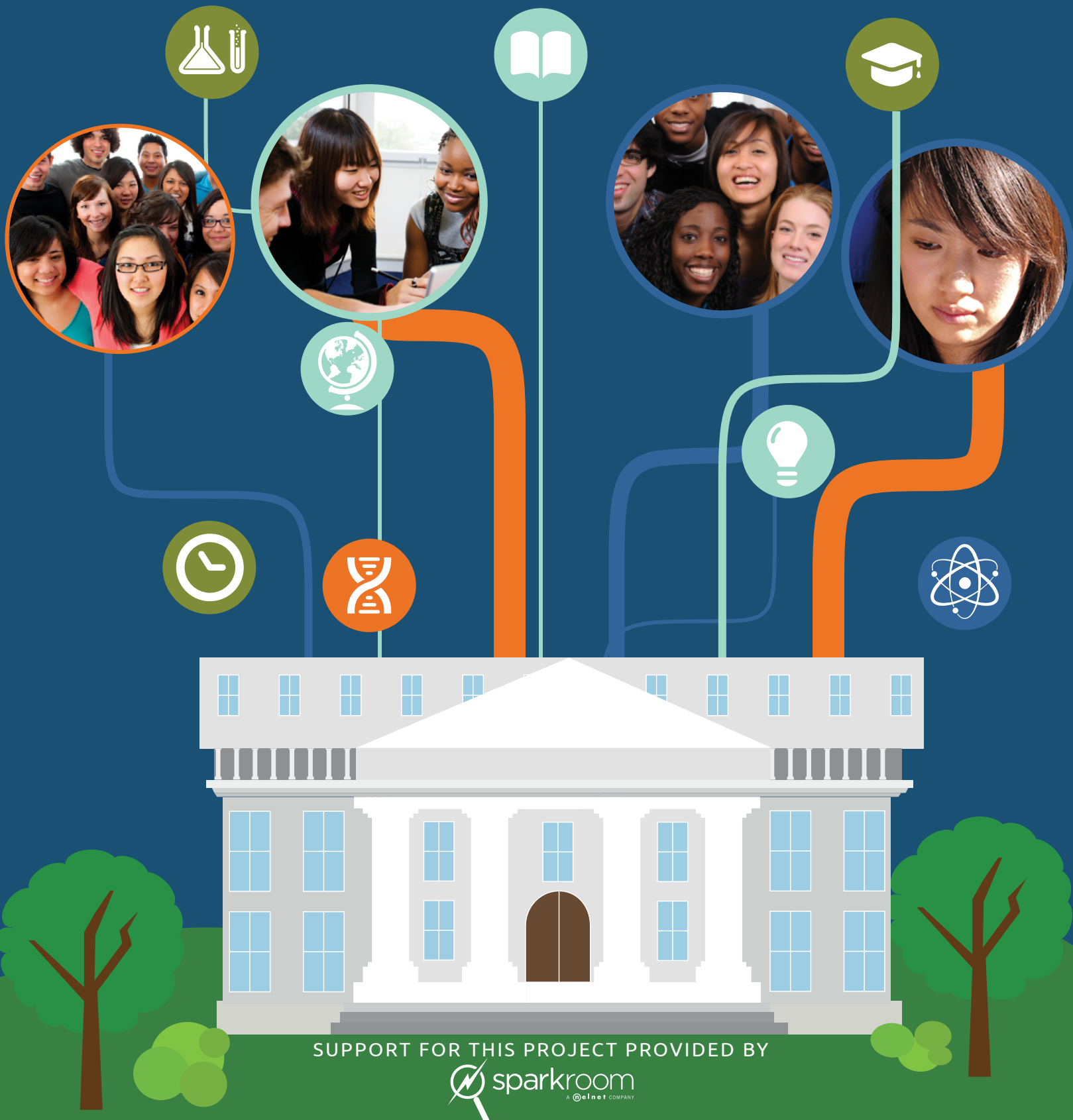


Strategies for Recruiting Students

A SELECTION OF *INSIDE HIGHER ED* ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

JUNE 2014



SUPPORT FOR THIS PROJECT PROVIDED BY





Welcome to the new Sparkroom.

“Build it and they will come” is no longer a viable approach for student recruitment. Enrollment continues to decline (0.8% for the spring 2014 term, according to a report released in May¹), forcing schools to be more competitive than ever to find and enroll highly qualified students.

For years, Sparkroom has been one of the primary innovators within the higher education space. Our industry-leading technology is the most adopted and powerful performance marketing software for higher education, helping marketers grow enrollments while controlling the cost of student recruitment. But we knew Sparkroom could do more.

I am proud to introduce you to the NEW Sparkroom, now offering Marketing Services plus Marketing Software. We provide fully transparent, analytics-based strategies, customized to your *needs* and designed to do just one thing—achieve your enrollment marketing objectives.

Our team of digital marketing experts has been focused on higher education for more than a decade. As a result, they know how to develop comprehensive, integrated marketing campaigns that attract the right students to your brand while managing recruitment costs. And everything they do is designed to help you succeed.

Our superior combination of Marketing Services and Marketing Software helps schools succeed in today's highly competitive marketplace. We do it by converting the complex into something simple: enrollments. Every campaign we build and execute incorporates an analytic review of historical and global data with strategies designed to meet specific school enrollment goals. And because we value openness and the knowledge it provides, we provide our partner schools with real-time access to every campaign detail—right down to actual media cost and performance.

Sending more brochures won't fill your empty seats. If you're ready for a strategic, targeted approach to enrollment, give us a ring.

Here's to filling your seats,

Todd Eicher
CEO, Sparkroom and Nelnet Enrollment Solutions

Disclaimer: This is an Advertisement

1. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Spring 2014 Current Term Enrollment Estimates, Reported May 14, 2014.

Sparkroom is owned by Nelnet (NYSE: NNI) and part of the Nelnet Enrollment Solutions (NES) family of brands. Nelnet Enrollment Solutions provides products and services that keep students and their families engaged throughout the pre-college, in-college and post-college experience.

INTRODUCTION

Creating a class of students is imagined by some in the public to be purely an act of sorting and rejecting – a process in which colleges decide whom they want to enroll. For a very small number of elite institutions, there is still some truth to that image. For everyone else, the strategies behind building a class involve lots of research, lots of wooing and lots of money. Colleges – public and private alike – are striving to expand their enrollment bases out of state and out of the country. They are trying to craft tuition policies that provide revenue for their institutions but don't scare off potential applicants and their families. They are debating whether to grow or shrink their size. And they are searching for distinguishing features to make them stand out in the competition for the best students (with "best" defined in many varying ways).

The articles and essays in this booklet examine some of the strategies being tried, some of the challenges colleges are facing, and some of the (early) results. *Inside Higher Ed* will continue to cover these issues and welcomes your suggestions and comments.

--The Editors

editor@insidehighered.com



Ignite Your Performance Marketing.



The New Sparkroom

Marketing Services + Marketing Software

Sparkroom knows what it takes to attract the right students to your brand while managing recruitment costs. Our superior combination of Marketing Services and industry-leading Marketing Software gives schools a competitive advantage, allowing for improved efficiency, higher quality and better conversion rates.

- ▶ Fully transparent
- ▶ Results-driven
- ▶ Analytics-based
- ▶ Customized solutions

Our campaigns are designed to do one thing: achieve your enrollment marketing objectives.

Email sales@sparkroom.com or call 877.423.1366 to learn the difference Sparkroom can make for your school.

News Articles

Summer Scramble

By Ry Rivard

What happens after tuition-dependent private colleges miss their enrollment goals? Depends on the campus.

To avoid enrollment shortfalls heading into the summer of 2014, some tuition-dependent private colleges are changing how they package financial aid for students.

Some colleges are offering more aid upfront to try to avoid shortfalls altogether. Others adjusted swaths of aid packages as it became clear they were unlikely to enroll as many students as they had planned by May 1, the traditional but decreasingly relevant decision day for students going to selective colleges.

Even colleges that have successfully met their enrollment goals are worried about poaching by other institutions still looking to meet their goals, and are beginning to offer more tuition discounts to lure students.

All are signs of the continued challenges faced especially by tuition-dependent and smaller private colleges, some of which remain under the weather for a variety of reasons, including the rebound of public university budgets and the wariness of some students to graduate with liberal arts degrees that don't seem to offer a clear career path.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling keeps a running list of colleges – including major public universities – that are still enrolling students. This can serve as a proxy for finding colleges that have failed to meet their enrollment targets.

Such is the case at Widener University, a private institution just outside Philadelphia with about 3,200 undergraduates. Despite a good year in 2013 – it had its largest and most academically accomplished class of first-year students ever – the university has so far missed its enrollment goals for fall 2014.

Edwin Wright, executive director of admissions at Widener, blames hot competition in the Philadelphia market. He said other private colleges offered larger aid packages while Widener used the same strategy that had worked just a year earlier.

“I think my worst fear has kind of come to fruition,” Wright said. “I’m finding a lot of schools in our region – some higher up in the food chain than I would consider Widener, some lower down in the food chain than I would consider Widener – really put money

out there.”

The experience is being anecdotally confirmed across the country.

“As I talk to my peer institutions, they are struggling to secure their classes and the only way they are going to do that is by leveraging more financial aid dollars, whether they are budgeted or unbudgeted,” said Concordia University-St. Paul’s senior chief of operations, Eric LaMott.

Most private undergraduate colleges operate under a “high tuition, high discount” model, which can lead to confusion among applicants who believe the price a college says it charges is what the college actually costs. Most colleges offer students huge discounts in the form of need-based aid for low-income students and “merit” aid for students from population groups they would like to enroll. Concordia is among the institutions that has cut its sticker price in hopes of attracting students scared off by the high prices other colleges charge, an approach that has so far seen mixed results at other institutions.

At Widener, Wright said he saw multiple colleges offer aid packages worth up to 80 percent of their sticker price to the same student with a below-2.5 grade point average and a 940 on the SAT. Wright said Widener was reacting to aid packages offered by other schools that were for “really average students.”

“Every kid was in play and I think some people are just trying to meet



numbers and not necessarily net revenue goals or discount goals and just throwing caution to the wind to meet their enrollment target, whatever that may be,” he said.

Widener is now 70 students short for an entering class it had hoped would have 750 to 800 students. Wright said his office is sending out web survey after web survey to try to understand what students are thinking – whether they have already made commitments to go elsewhere or are still on the fence about Widener.

About two dozen Pennsylvania colleges, most of them in the Philadelphia market, also still have space available, according to the NACAC survey, which is not comprehensive and can include colleges that may be looking to pick up a stellar student or two and are not necessarily facing significant enrollment problems.

La Salle University is a 4,500-student Roman Catholic institution in Philadelphia that is looking to meet its enrollment goals. It has begun sending

out revised aid offers to students who have been accepted but have not yet told La Salle they plan to go somewhere else.

“After May 1, we assess where we are in terms of deposits received and aid dollars that may still be available and, if we have not yet achieved our enrollment goal, make a determination if additional or increased offers of assistance can be made,” the university’s vice president for enrollment services, George Walter, said in a statement. “This is what we are doing now.”

Some officials at colleges that have met their enrollment targets are worried about just this kind of activity if it results in poaching.

Admissions officials and enrollment management consultants say dollars offered after May 1 tend to be less effective than money offered to students earlier in the year – that it’s not worth it for colleges to keep financial aid bullets in their chamber for summer, but rather offer discounts upfront to make sure they are in a good

place by May 1.

Ursinus College, another private college in the Philadelphia area, did meet its enrollment targets for 2013-14 after adjusting its financial aid strategy, said President Bobby Fong. The college budgeted for 440 first-year students, but by the end of May 2014, 514 students had put down a deposit.

“This past fall, we tweaked our financial aid matrix to improve aid packages, but there was no extraordinary additional infusion of aid,” he said. “It was a tactical, not strategic, adjustment.”

As Ursinus increased its tuition, it raised its discount – Fong said its discount rate would go up by 2 percent – but it had more money to spend on discounting because of the higher tuition.

Fong said the college also made sure accepted students were getting more “touches” from Ursinus, including more on-campus events for would-be students and more calls to them from faculty members, current students, staff members and even trustees.



Transparent. Customized. Driven By Analytics.

Sparkroom Marketing Services

Working as an extension of your marketing team, Sparkroom Marketing Services leverages our years of higher education enrollment marketing experience to create customized marketing strategies based on your unique objectives.

- ▶ Pay-Per-Inquiry (PPI) Vendor Management
- ▶ Pay-Per-Click (PPC) Enrollment Marketing
- ▶ Marketing Analytics
- ▶ Award-Winning Compliance Monitoring
- ▶ Email Marketing
- ▶ Search Engine Optimization
- ▶ Social Media
- ▶ Targeted Display

Our analytics-based approach converts the complex into something simple—enrollments. Every campaign we build and execute incorporates an analytic review of historical and global data and incorporates strategies designed to meet individual, specific school enrollment goals.

Email sales@sparkroom.com or call 877.423.1366 to request a free enrollment marketing campaign audit.

“If you hold back money and come back with a sweetener later on, it tends to have a diminished effect dollar-for-dollar – along with that, it creates an atmosphere of negotiation, which is a challenge for all of these institutions.”

FIGHT THROUGH THE SUMMER

Some colleges, it seems, will be fighting for students through the summer – either to make sure they have enough or to keep the students they have from melting away.

Widener has not yet settled on a strategy, Wright said.

College admissions officials and consultants said the best strategy is to front-load aid spending.

“If you hold back money and come back with a sweetener later on, it tends to have a diminished effect dollar-for-dollar – along with that, it creates an atmosphere of negotiation, which is a challenge for all of these institutions,” said Craig Goebel, a principal at the enrollment management consulting firm Art & Science Group.

Kevin Crockett, the president of the enrollment consulting firm Noel-Levitz, which advises about 250 colleges on financial aid and enrollment strategies and tactics, said he’s seeing colleges dial up their aid offers in March and April with certain segments of their target population if it’s clear the college isn’t going to meet its targets.

They will, for instance, look at where a student puts their name on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, known as the FAFSA. If a student puts

a college’s name higher on the list of those they might attend, it is taken as an indicator of preference. Millions of high school students and their parents probably have no idea this happens after they fill out that part of the form, but colleges may use the information to change aid package offers.

Crockett said he would not advise his clients to change aid offers to individual families based on the so-called FAFSA position, but colleges he advises do look at FAFSA position for population segments – along with other factors – and change their aid offers late in the enrollment cycle.

“You start to put those factors together and say, ‘We may want to adjust the aid offer for that group of 100 students,’” Crockett said.

Crockett said it’s not a good spot for colleges to be in, always trying to make their class with aid money.

He said colleges that have enrollment shortfalls year after year should reevaluate what they are doing and begin making broader adjustments by offering new programs.

ETHICS

Officials at colleges that have hit their enrollment targets by May 1 may act differently from those that have not, said W. Kent Barnds, a vice president who oversees enrollment at Augustana

College, in Illinois, a college that did meet its enrollment targets by May 1, 2014.

One needy student appealed to Augustana because she didn’t have a worthy co-signer, indicating that she was going to be struggling to pay for college and would be assuming debt. Barnds said his financial aid director asked whether they should advise the student to go somewhere else. In the spring of 2013, when Augustana missed its enrollment target, Barnds said its officials would have done everything they could to make sure the student came; in spring 2014, because they met their goals, the college’s officials recommended the student enroll elsewhere.

“When you’re in a stronger position you can be a little bit more straightforward in doing the right thing,” Barnds said.

Likewise, the college is not going to fight over students, like another student who came to Augustana with an aid offer from another college that was \$1,100 better.

In 2014, Barnds said his college wasn’t going to sweeten the deal any more; a year earlier, he said he would have tried to match the other offer because his enrollment missed its target. ■

Shrinking as a Strategy

By Ry Rivard

While dozens of liberal arts colleges are banking on plans to grow, a Vermont institution doesn't think that's realistic, and has developed a path to preserve itself by getting smaller.

After surveying the fate of small private liberal arts colleges, Saint Michael's College in Vermont is now planning ahead for enrollment declines, inexpensive online classes for credit and debt-averse students and families.

College officials say they now have a way to keep the college sustainable by making it smaller. Even though enrollment is steady and there's been a budget surplus each of the past six years, Saint Michael's is planning to enroll 10 to 15 percent fewer students over the next three to four years and, in turn, employ about 10 percent fewer faculty and staff members. That approach runs counter to the strategies of some liberal arts colleges that are saying that they will thrive by getting larger, even as many doubt that a growing number of students will be seeking liberal arts degrees.

A task force of three Saint Michael's alumni, three faculty members and three trustees spent about nine months studying what will happen to small tuition-dependent liberal arts colleges and found there's a "perfect storm" approaching.

For Saint Michael's, those projected problems include a 15 percent drop

in high school graduates in the Northeast, but also an unsustainable pricing model that is going to collide with a student debt bubble and large-enrollment online courses from elite universities that will drive down costs.

President John J. Neuhauser, a former business school dean at Boston College, said Saint Michael's is preparing for its enrollment to drop from 1,900 now to 1,600 in the next several years. In turn, the college plans to cut the number of faculty positions from 150 to 135, mainly through attrition.

Neuhauser said the assumption is that the steep fall-off in the number of high school graduates is going to affect somebody -- and that somebody might be Saint Michael's.

"Everybody thinks they are smarter than everybody else, but we're going to plan as if we weren't and try to be smarter than everybody else," he said.

The college is trying to avoid a number of scenarios by planning for the worst and hoping for the best. Some colleges have had to suddenly and sharply cut faculty because of unexpected enrollment declines.

Saint Michael's is also adding a summer online program for students from elsewhere that will start to rely

on content from online courses to help lower costs. The summer program could eventually help students graduate in three years.

"It's pretty clear that you have to get some productivity out of small liberal arts colleges or else they are simply going to price themselves out of existence," Neuhauser said.

Michael McGrath, a trustee who led the task force, is a former business consultant who said he's seen companies swept under by technology. He asked everyone on the task force to take a free online class, whether from iTunes or from the massive open online course providers edX and Coursera.

He said the task force concluded there are going to be significant changes in the market for all of higher education, and he said it's better to be "slightly paranoid and react in advance."

"There's that potential in higher education that it's going to be more than a little downsizing by the marginal colleges," he said. "It could be quite profound."

John O'Meara, an associate physics professor who was on the task force, said faculty members plan to discuss the college's plan in depth in May but are increasingly aware that perhaps the current higher ed economy is not "just the normal doom and gloom-ism." He said professors read about problems but always assume the larger trends won't hit them.

"No faculty member is saying, 'Please fire me' or something -- nobody is embracing this with joy," O'Meara said. "But I think there is an acknowledgment



Saint Michael's College

among the faculty that we may be in a more unique financial situation than we have in the past.”

McGrath, the trustee, believes the student debt bubble is going to pop and depress prices. He called the government-backed loans with few strings attached the “biggest government scam and the most unethical thing in history.”

“It’s the biggest scam, and then they will probably turn around and blame colleges,” he said. “They will hold hearings and they will say, ‘When the student applied to you for a federal loan, why didn’t you monitor what the grades were?’ ”

If that easy money dries up, McGrath said, there will be even more pressure on colleges.

Other small private colleges are

working on ways to grow their market share by, among other things, cutting their sticker price.

“Those things can either be just interesting strategies or desperate – depends on how they work out,” McGrath said.

Neuhauser, likewise, said any effort by Saint Michael’s to grow net tuition by increasing enrollment would be “foolish.” For one thing, Saint Michael’s is near its capacity now, meaning additional students at the residential college could force new construction.

The college is still working out how it plans to reduce faculty lines and continue to maintain a healthy variety of course options.

Some people argue most traditionally structured colleges will struggle to maintain a diversity of courses if

they have fewer than 2,000 students. Neuhauser said that’s generally true but he believes the threshold is a bit lower and technology can help.

“I think it’s going to change how it’s conducted, but we’ll see, it’s easy to be critical of MOOCs and things like that now, but what’s edX, 18 months old? It’s pretty new,” Neuhauser said. “I betcha Gutenberg had the same problem.”

McGrath said he believes the trustees are setting a good example by planning for the worst -- “it’s really dumb if you don’t prepare for a storm” -- and that he’s seen too many boards in the corporate world fail to react to changes. He said he used to tell his clients, “If everybody is happy 90 days from now, then we’re not doing enough.” ■

Ratings Strategy With a Cost?

By Michael Stratford

One university says it has already begun denying admission to “risky” applicants over fears of how it would be rated under the Obama ratings proposal.

Of all the criticism leveled at the Obama administration’s plan to rate colleges, perhaps the most widespread critique is that a ratings system will harm disadvantaged students’ access to higher education.

It’s a theme that permeated the Education Department’s public hearings on the ratings proposal in fall 2013 as well as the hundreds of pages of comments officials have received about the plan.

A ratings system in which colleges are judged based on the outcomes of their students, the argument goes, would create incentives for institutions to stop enrolling disadvantaged students, who may hurt the institution’s objective measures, such as graduation rates or post-graduate earnings.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan and his deputies who are currently developing the metrics for the ratings system -- a draft of which has been promised by the end of the spring 2014 -- have said they are keenly aware of the potential for the plan to create such perverse incentives and unintended consequences. In order to prevent that, officials have said, they plan to compare colleges only to peer institutions with similar missions and also include metrics, such as the

percentage of Pell Grant recipients, that reward colleges based on the access they already provide to low-income students.

But at least one university says it has already begun denying admission to “risky” applicants -- those who don’t meet the institution’s typical minimum standards for SAT scores and GPA -- over fears of how it would be rated under the Obama ratings proposal.

The president of that university said in a recent interview that the university is especially worried about how the administration’s proposed rating system would judge its graduation rate, which is improving but still under 60 percent.

The university president would speak about the matter only on the condition of anonymity, but the president outlined to *Inside Higher Ed* how the university had changed its admissions process in 2013-14 because of the ratings proposal.

Students applying to the university -- a mildly selective private nonprofit institution that is tuition dependent -- typically need to meet minimum criteria of a 900 combined math/verbal SAT score and a grade-point average of about 2.8 in order to be considered for admission. However, each year

the university selects a portion of applicants who are underqualified by those objective metrics but who show potential or have overcome particular difficulties in their lives. Those applicants are then vetted by a committee of faculty and counselors.

In recent years, the university has enrolled as much as between 18 and 20 percent of its freshman class of about 500 from that population of students, who are then often paired with a tutor or required to take a one-semester course that teaches college success strategies.

“Because of the special support for those students we have been comfortable thinking our commitment to providing opportunities for underserved populations remains a good idea,” the university president said.

In 2013-14, however, the university president said that “increased pressure for ‘outcomes’ from the government” has forced the institution to put together an incoming class made up of fewer than 15 percent of that “riskier” pool of applicants.

“Until we know what is happening with the president’s proposed rating system, I am not willing to risk the future of our institution by taking a gamble on these students, even though I believe that they are worth it,” the university president said.

The president provided detailed information -- but not names or other identifiable information -- on four students who normally would have made the admission cut despite their low G.P.A. and SAT scores, but

were denied in 2013-14 given the institution's increased aversion to risk:

- A black female who is a recent immigrant from Africa and attended a public school in a suburb of a major urban area in the mid-Atlantic. Her GPA is 2.7 and her combined math/reading SAT is just under 700. "That's not admissible," the president said, but she has strong recommendations and her grades are good except for her junior year, when she took a challenging course load.

- A Hispanic male from a public school in a relatively small town. His GPA is 2.4 and his combined SAT score is 900. "He wants to study accounting or business so he can help in his family's business," the president said. "He's a risk, but if he were to be successful it would be wonderful for him and his family."

- A white male from a private high school in the Northeast. His GPA is 2.2 and his combined SAT score is 1150. "The low G.P.A. makes me think he didn't try really hard, but his more-than-acceptable SAT makes you think he has the potential," the

president said, adding that the student had strong recommendations from his school principal and athletic coach.

- A black female who lives in a relatively small town. Her GPA is 2.3 and her combined SAT score is 700. Still, it appeared her grades were improving, the president said. She also came from a single-parent, working-class household and is highly involved with volunteer work, the president added.

The administration hasn't yet said how graduation rates, or any metric, would factor into the rating system.

However, because graduation rates look four or six years into the past, "I can't wait for them to make the decision because by the time they make the decision and implement it, it will be too late for my institution," the university president said. "I know I'm not alone in this."

David Hawkins, director of public policy and research for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, said he thought the university's decision was premature.

"It seems a little early to be making



the decision, noting that institutions have long been under pressure, in part from commercial rankings like those from U.S. News, to admit more highly academically qualified students.

"One of the concerns we raised with the administration's proposal is that those pressures exist and can be fairly detrimental to access," he said.

"Once the framework [for the ratings system] is made clear, we are of the mind that there will be gaming behaviors -- there could be moves colleges make that will cut off access, though it depends on what the proposal is," Hawkins said. "Admissions officers have a great deal of skepticism about whether this will work." ■



College Counseling Matters

By Scott Jaschik

Low-income students who received guidance were much likelier than others to enroll at a four-year college, study finds.

A theme of several studies in 2012 and 2013 has been that there are plenty of academically

talented low-income students who for some combination of reasons are not applying to competitive colleges

to which they would probably be admitted.

A new study along those lines -- this time documenting the impact of intense college counseling -- was released in October 2013 by the National Bureau of Economic Research. The study found that a nonprofit group that focuses on college counseling in Minneapolis-St. Paul had a significant impact in increasing the rate at which low-income students enrolled in four-



Analysis. Power. Performance.

Sparkroom Marketing Software

The award-winning Sparkroom Marketing Software, integrates marketing data, automates marketing process and provides marketing analytics that drive smarter decisions and a more optimized budget.

- ▶ Performance-Based Process Automation
- ▶ Cross-Platform Data Integration
- ▶ Multidimensional Analytics
- ▶ Pre-Built Integrations

Sparkroom Marketing Software is cloud based and helps marketers grow enrollments while controlling the cost of student acquisition. Take control of your marketing campaigns and do more with less with the power of Sparkroom Marketing Software.

Email sales@sparkroom.com or call 877.423.1366 to request a personalized demonstration of Sparkroom Marketing Software.

year colleges, including competitive institutions.

The study was conducted by Christopher Avery of Harvard University -- co-author (with Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University) of a study released in December 2012 that found that most highly talented, low-income students never apply to a single competitive college. That work has set off widespread discussions about what sort of interventions might make a difference.

Avery's new study looks at College Possible, a program that provides in-depth college counseling as well as tutoring on the ACT or SAT. Avery was able to study the impact of the program by comparing results of College Possible participants with those who applied to (and were not admitted to) the program despite having slightly better academic preparation.

The study found no statistically significant gains in ACT scores for those who participated in the program. Avery writes, however, that this may understate the impact of the program, because he suspects that some of those who didn't get into College



Christopher Avery

Possible found test-prep services elsewhere.

But the study found a significant impact on College Possible participants in applying to and enrolling in four-year colleges, and especially to competitive colleges. More than 45 percent of the students in the College Possible program enrolled at a four-year college, while the figure in the control group was 34 percent. And the most popular college among those in the program was Augsburg College, a competitive

liberal arts college that did not enroll a single student from the control group (though some would appear to have been academically qualified had they applied).

The findings could be significant in that the earlier Avery-Hoxby study noted that low-income students who enroll in more competitive colleges are more likely to land at institutions with better graduation rates, more financial aid, and more resources to promote their academic success. ■

\$6 Can Make a Difference

By Scott Jaschik

Study suggests that seemingly small expenses may discourage low-income students from applying to more colleges.

In an era when sticker price at some colleges tops \$60,000, it may seem

odd to think that \$6 could make a difference in students' decisions about

the institutions to which they apply.

But \$6 could in fact make all the difference, suggests a study released by the National Bureau of Economic Research (abstract available here). The study adds yet more evidence to the theory of "undermatching" – namely that significant numbers of low-income, high talent students are not applying to as many colleges, or colleges that are as competitive, as would benefit them.

Amanda Pallais, assistant professor of economics and social studies at Harvard University, studied the impact of a 1997 shift by ACT, which that year increased from three to four the number of score reports a student could send out to colleges without paying an additional fee. Before 1997, those who wanted to send four or more reports paid \$6 per additional report.

Pallais found that, prior to 1997, over 80 percent of ACT takers sent exactly three score reports, and only 5 percent sent four. Immediately after the change was adopted, the percentage of students sending four reports rose to 75 percent while those sending three dropped to 10 percent. (The SAT already offered four reports and did not see a similar shift that year.)

Using data from the American Freshman Survey, Pallais then found that low-income students may have been the particular beneficiaries of the shift. In the two years after the switch, they showed a 20 percent increase in the number of applications sent. Further, she found that, on average, the ACT takers in these cohorts enrolled at more selective colleges than had been the case before the change.

The finding is consistent with recent work by Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University and Christopher Avery of Harvard University, who found in a paper published in 2013



that highly qualified low-income high school students tend to apply to far fewer competitive colleges than do their better-off counterparts, and that a majority do not apply to a single competitive college. Their work has prompted debate over how to encourage more low-income students to apply.

Some have suggested that various waivers available from testing companies and colleges for application fees may not be enough, and that eliminating fees is the way to go. Reed College in 2013 eliminated its application fee for that reason.

Pallais writes that the findings suggest that small financial charges can be meaningful. “Because the cost of sending an additional (non-free) ACT score was merely \$6 throughout, this sizable behavioral change is surprising and suggests that students

may use simple heuristics in making their application decisions. In such a setting, small policy perturbations can have large effects on welfare,” she writes.

And she also suggests that the findings could mean that the shift from three to four free reports may be as much about defining the norm as about money – and that these definitions may be particularly important to low-income students.

“[S]tudents may interpret the ACT providing three (or four) free score reports as a signal that sending three (or four) applications is recommended and use that signal as a rule of thumb about how many colleges to apply to,” she writes, noting that “college application guides show that many students are looking for an authority to provide a rule of thumb on how many colleges they should apply to.” ■

“Students may use simple heuristics in making their application decisions. In such a setting, small policy perturbations can have large effects on welfare.”

The Admissions Essay Is Back

By Scott Jaschik

As Bard restores idea of writing your way into college, we offer a look at its essay prompts, and others. Are colleges asking the right questions? Was Kant correct about dishonesty? And how cool is the mantis shrimp?

Bard College announced in September 2013 that it would offer a new path to admission: an online essay examination in which applicants will have to submit four 2,500-word research papers. Those whose papers are judged by the college's faculty members to have produced B+ work or better will be offered admission, without any SAT scores, review of high school transcripts, or teacher recommendations.

The sample questions Bard released are not remotely like the standard "tell us why you'd like to enroll at college X" or "discuss a meaningful personal experience" essay prompts that can be found on so many applications. And most application essays have length limits at well under 1,000 words.

Bard's move, however, makes a series of essays far more important than those on other applications. A statement from President Leon Botstein described the need for change this way: "The tradition of high stakes examination, using multiple choice questions, has made the entire apparatus of high school and college entrance examinations bankrupt. Teachers, scientists, and scholars must once again take charge of the way we test. What the Bard Entrance

Examination asks is that students study source materials and write comprehensively in order to show the quality of their reasoning."

The admission-by-essay approach will be an option, and Bard will continue to offer more traditional paths to admission (although the college noted that it has for years allowed those applying to do so without submitting SAT or ACT scores).

Bard's announcement came the same year in which Tufts University was criticized for asking (in one option among a series of questions) "What does #YOLO mean to you?" As you will see from the full text of the question below, Tufts actually asked more than that in the question. But just asking about the popular Twitter hashtag for "you only live once" led to quite a lot of Internet mocking. The Hairpin suggested that Tufts also considered such prompts as "It's Friday. Which of your mediocre talents are you going to post to the internet this weekend, and why?" and "Beyonce's college application essay was the greatest college application essay of all time. Discuss."

Changes in the Common Application's essay prompts almost always cause angst and some criticism

-- even though the ever-growing number of colleges (now more than 500) that participate in the Common Application have the option of asking their own additional questions (and many do).

When the University of Chicago moved to join the Common Application in 2006, students protested that the institution was selling out the values behind what had been called the "Uncommon Application," known for its essay prompts. The university has kept the spirit of its prompts, even as it has seen its application numbers go up after joining the Common App.

Here are some of the essay prompts discussed above.

BARD COLLEGE

Applicants must answer one question from each of the three categories that follow, plus an additional essay from any of the categories. Students are encouraged to do research beyond the links to key resources that would be provided with the prompts. Here are samples from the categories.

Category A (Social Science, History, and Philosophy)

- "On a Supposed Right to Lie" is an essay written by Immanuel Kant in response to a challenge to Kant's ethical theory posed by a critic named Benjamin Constant; it is usually appended as a supplement to Kant's Critique of Practical Reason. Constant asked if "the German philosopher" (meaning Kant) actually intended that, even if a murderer comes to the door asking for the location of his next victim, who you know to be in the next room, the right thing to do would still be to tell



Bard College

the truth. (This has been discussed as “the murderer at the door problem.”) Constant’s suggestion is that it seems obvious in this case that the right thing to do is to lie (despite what Kant’s theory would dictate). (1) In broad strokes, how does Kant answer this challenge? (2) More precisely, what does Kant mean by saying that the truth-teller is not, in a real sense, free to choose his or her action? (3) More precisely still, what does Kant mean in his last paragraph when he says that “exceptions destroy the universality”? Why does Kant believe this is so important? Is it, according to you?

- In the Analects, Confucius identifies the cardinal virtue of ren (variously translated as goodness, humanity, benevolence) with many different attitudes and behaviors. Yet Confucius also says, “There is one thread that runs through my doctrines.” Commentators differ about what that one thread is. What, in your opinion, could that one thread be? How does that one thread tie together the wide range of moral values that Confucius celebrates in the Analects? Support your answer by interpreting specific passages from the text.

Category B (Arts and Literature)

- “Anyone who is too lazy to master the comparatively small glossary necessary to understand Chaucer deserves to be shut out from the reading of good books forever.” — Ezra Pound, ABC of Reading. Read “The Pardoner’s Tale.” Construct an argument in favor or against Pound’s statement. In writing your answer, refer to at least one other text from the period, for example, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, or *The Song of Roland*.

- Nikolai Gogol’s “The Nose” (1835) is considered one of the funniest works of Russian literature. It is the story of a man who wakes up one morning without his nose. But as its narrator quizzically puts it, “the most incomprehensible thing of all is, how authors can choose such subjects for their stories.” Ever since Aristotle, students expect to glean some wisdom from literature. But then, what to make of seemingly gratuitous and absurdist stories like Gogol’s “The Nose”?

Category C (Science and Mathematics)

- Consider the following two-player game, Don’t be Greedier, that involves players taking alternate turns removing pebbles from one pile of pebbles, subject to the following

rules: (1) The player to remove the last pebble or pebbles from the pile wins the game. (2) On the very first move of the game, the player to play is not allowed to remove all the pebbles and win immediately (that would be greedy). (3) After the first move, the number of pebbles removed can’t be more than the number of pebbles removed in the turn immediately prior (that would be greedier). That is, the sequence of numbers of pebbles removed on each turn is a monotonically non-increasing sequence. Starting with a pile of 12 pebbles, which player would win a game of Don’t be Greedier, assuming optimal play?

- In his 1963 lecture on gravity (you can also see the video here), Richard Feynman mentions that the “weird” behavior of Uranus led to the discovery of a new planet. More precisely, the fact that Uranus’s movement did not fit what was predicted by the then-current understanding of planetary motion could be explained by the existence of a not-yet-observed planet — and the planet was then observed right where predicted. Suppose that observatories had looked at the indicated position and had not actually found the

“The tradition of high stakes examination, using multiple choice questions, has made the entire apparatus of high school and college entrance examinations bankrupt. Teachers, scientists, and scholars must once again take charge of the way we test.”

predicted planet. What then? What new questions would this outcome pose for the scientific community? How could they test other explanations for the unexpected motion of Uranus?

THE COMMON APPLICATION

Colleges can add required or optional essays beyond having applicants pick from these.

- “Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.”
- “Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?”
- “Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?”
- “Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?”
- “Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.”

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

The much-discussed YOLO prompt

is in a question that is among six options for one part of the application.

- The ancient Romans started it when they coined the phrase “Carpe diem.” Jonathan Larson proclaimed “No day but today!” and most recently, Drake explained You Only Live Once (YOLO). Have you ever seized the day? Lived like there was no tomorrow? Or perhaps you plan to shout YOLO while jumping into something in the future. What does #YOLO mean to you?

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

- Winston Churchill believed “a joke is a very serious thing.” From Off-Off Campus’s improvisations to the Shady Dealer humor magazine to the renowned Latke-Hamantash debate, we take humor very seriously here at The University of Chicago (and we have since 1959, when our alums helped found the renowned comedy theater The Second City). Tell us your favorite joke and try to explain the joke without ruining it.
- In a famous quote by José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher proclaims, “*Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*” (1914). José Quintans, master of the Biological Sciences Collegiate Division at the University of Chicago, sees it another way: “*Yo soy yo y mi microbioma*” (2012). You are you and your...?

• “This is what history consists of. It’s the sum total of all the things they aren’t telling us.” — Don DeLillo, *Libra*. What is history, who are “they,” and what aren’t they telling us?

• The mantis shrimp can perceive both polarized light and multispectral images; they have the most complex eyes in the animal kingdom. Human eyes have color receptors for three colors (red, green, and blue); the mantis shrimp has receptors for 16 types of color, enabling them to see a spectrum far beyond the capacity of the human brain. Seriously, how cool is the mantis shrimp: mantisshrimp.uchicago.edu What might they be able to see that we cannot? What are we missing?

• How are apples and oranges supposed to be compared? Possible answers involve, but are not limited to, statistics, chemistry, physics, linguistics, and philosophy.

• In the spirit of adventurous inquiry, pose a question of your own. If your prompt is original and thoughtful, then you should have little trouble writing a great essay. Draw on your best qualities as a writer, thinker, visionary, social critic, sage, citizen of the world, or future citizen of the University of Chicago; take a little risk, and have fun. ■

Paper (Tuition) Cuts

By Ry Rivard

Small private colleges cut their sticker price in an effort not to scare away middle-class students. But will it work or hurt? Will anyone really save much money?

A spate of small private liberal arts colleges are dramatically slashing their sticker prices in an effort to, they say, tell the truth about the real cost of college, help families and attract new students.

The price cuts – which, for some students, may be more on paper than actual reductions in out-of-pocket expenses – are not a new phenomenon, but the rate at which small colleges are adopting the maneuver, as well as tuition freezes, appears to be picking up speed.

In August and September 2013, Ashland University in Ohio and Converse College in South Carolina both announced reductions of more than \$10,000 a year for students who enroll in fall 2014 and pay full price. They join other institutions that have announced similarly big cuts, including the University of Charleston in West Virginia, where cuts took effect a year earlier, and Concordia University-St. Paul, where cuts took effect starting fall 2013. These announcements have received considerable attention, with typical headlines for Converse along the lines of, “This college is slashing its tuition by 43 percent.”

The colleges each portray the efforts as a path to reducing the financial

burden on students. And, indeed, they may, but not nearly as much as at first glance. That’s, in part, because the colleges have reduced their sticker prices to about what most students are paying already, given all the scholarships and aid that colleges give to lure students to high-tuition institutions. Hardly anyone was paying the old sticker price anyway.

The cuts are neither a panacea for small private colleges nor a true solution for the ever-rising costs of higher education in America, according to others who have tried. Some also predict that, done improperly or by the wrong institution, tuition cuts could ruin some small private colleges by decreasing their allure.

Converse spent about a year and a half looking at its tuition prices and decided to cut them by 43 percent. Officials discovered that most students were paying about \$17,000 even though the college’s advertised price is about \$29,000.

“We realized just how incredibly affordable we were once you cut through all the published rates,” said President Betsy Fleming.

Some students and families, of course, didn’t realize that either, and so may have shied away from

applying. “We looked at it as being very confusing,” she said, “saying, Well, we cost this much, but don’t worry, we’ll help you figure out how to make it affordable.”

So, the college said it would start charging students what most of them were actually paying. Its fall 2014 advertised tuition for all traditional undergraduates will be \$16,500.

Fleming said an end to the “high-tuition, high-discount model” will help attract new students who were scared away by the old sticker price.

It could also help to retain some middle-class students who were caught in a doughnut hole: too wealthy to qualify for need-based aid and too poor to be able to easily afford college using their own money or loans. “When we announced it to our students there were incredible cheers of gratitude, even tears -- students coming up and saying, ‘This is going to help out my family so much,’” Fleming said.

Fleming said all students will be paying less, while the college does not project any revenue losses because it expects enrollment increases due to the cuts. It is also working to control costs.

In late August 2013, Ashland announced a similar deal. It said it would cut its advertised tuition price by 37 percent in fall 2014 to \$18,908 from \$30,064.

Scott Van Loo, vice president for enrollment management, said he did not see the high prices as sustainable.

“If we did lower our price point, the price objection to our model would change,” he said, referring to the scare



Converse College promotes its tuition cut.

factor of a high price tag.

Van Loo said while some students and families understood the advertised price was not usually what they would end up paying, others were scared away.

At the higher price, he said, “families would not consider us or students would not consider us and they deemed us unaffordable.”

Ashland’s students generally paid \$20,000 in tuition even though the full price tag was about \$39,000, including \$9,502 in room and board costs. The new sticker price for fall 2014 will be \$29,354, including room and board, but officials expect the average student will still actually pay roughly \$20,000.

Until recently, colleges had been benefiting from an ever-increasing number of high school graduates and the easy availability of loan money, partially through home equity.

Now, high school graduate numbers are projected to stay flat or fall in most states and, following the downturn, the

home equity loans that helped many middle-class families are hard to come by.

To adjust, the colleges making dramatic sticker price cuts are clearly looking to drive up volume by attracting students who thought they were priced out of the institution.

“If an institution sees (enrollment) growth through this type of change, they will see positive revenue outcome,” Van Loo said.

That has so far been the case at Concordia, which announced in 2012 that it would cut its tuition price by \$10,000 to \$19,700 for the next class of students. In fall 2013, Concordia had 104 more new freshmen and 79 more transfer students on the first day of class compared to the previous year; it also saw an increase in the student retention rate.

“We definitely are filling up classes, that’s for sure,” said Concordia’s senior chief of operations, Eric LaMott.

It’s not clear, though, how well this

model will work in the long term, either to attract new students, increase sustainability or really drive down the cost of college.

‘NOT A PANACEA’

The University of Charleston tried a \$5,000 cut in sticker price for all new students starting in fall 2012. The change, said President Ed Welch, did not cause a dramatic enrollment increase, though it did attract some new middle-class families.

“My judgment is that reducing the sticker price brings some additional students to look at the institution and then we were successful in converting those additional students, but it was not a panacea that placed us in an entirely new marketing segment,” Welch said. “It seems for schools that aren’t in the high brand category you probably have to reduce your tuition by \$10,000 or something really dramatic -- then you’re really competing with the publics without public money.”

Welch and Roger Williams

ANNOUNCED CUT VS. ACTUAL SAVINGS:



Announced cuts and savings at Converse were...

43%, from sticker price of **\$29,000**

to sticker price of **\$16,500**But, really, the average students last year paid just over **\$17,000.**



University President Donald Farish both cautioned that colleges could see their price reduction plans dramatically backfire. Both cited the example of J.C. Penney, which had long brought in customers with sale prices. Then a new CEO came along and tried an everyday low prices model. The plan backfired because shoppers used to getting good deals on higher-priced goods were being sold what seemed to be just cheap clothes. The high-discount model does work, they said, citing Jos. A. Bank, which always offers steep discounts on suits; it rarely if ever sells them for the “full price.”

“The sad thing is that applies apparently to higher education,” Welch said.

Officials at Roger Williams, which is in Rhode Island, studied doing dramatic price cuts and concluded it could torpedo the institution, Farish said.

The university hired Maguire Associates to check the opinions of students and parents. Would they

prefer a \$36,000 tuition and \$13,000 in aid or would they prefer \$23,000 tuition?

By a 2 to 1 margin, parents and students preferred the higher tuition and the chunk of aid.

Farish said the logic is that if \$13,000 is the average, parents don’t want to forgo the opportunity of “winning the jackpot” and getting more money.

“The other lesson we learned is, congratulations higher education, you’ve converted higher education to a commodity,” he said.

So, Farish decided to do something else: he would start guaranteeing students four years of the same tuition rate. That doesn’t mean Roger Williams won’t increase tuition on each incoming class – though it has been able to freeze tuition for two years – but it does mean parents and students know coming in what they will pay going out. The university is also emphasizing its efforts to provide experiences that help students get a job after they graduate.

“Our object is to say, ‘We’re in this with you, folks,’” Farish said.

This fall, the university saw a 10 percent increase in freshman enrollment and a 5 percent increase in the retention rate from freshman to sophomore year.

Because of that, Farish said Roger Williams will bring in more revenue than if it had increased tuition by 3 percent. That would have brought in \$3 million in revenue but half of that would have had to go to financial aid, he said. Now, the enrollment and retention increase has netted the college \$1.8 million.

David Strauss, who advises colleges at the enrollment management consulting firm Art & Science Group, said whether dramatic sticker price cuts will help institutions depends on “idiosyncratic” factors.

His firm, for instance, has done modeling for institutions where boards have been interested in dramatic price reductions and dramatic reductions in aid. “We haven’t yet found that

“My judgment is that reducing the sticker price brings some additional students to look at the institution and then we were successful in converting those additional students, but it was not a panacea that placed us in an entirely new marketing segment.”

institution where it makes sense,” he said.

Instead, his firm found institutions could see their class sizes shrink by half or more because students previously attracted by the higher price would be turned off.

Strauss said there are often short-term bumps in enrollment, but these, he said, may have more to do with buzz generated by dramatic announcements. “Anything in its first year or second year, I wouldn’t pay attention to,” Strauss warned.

Another consulting firm, Noel-Levitz, reached a different conclusion, at least when it advised Concordia and Converse, said its CEO, Kevin Crockett.

He said institutions are charging few of their students the actual sticker price to begin with. At Converse, for instance, only about 1 in 10 students were actually paying the \$29,000 the college claimed to be charging. “That always raises a question: Why are we charging a high sticker price if we are not able to achieve that from very many families?” Crockett said.

He said colleges that change their pricing structure may not be able to

hang their hats on the change forever for marketing purposes, but the change creates a fundamental change in the institution’s mindset.

Crockett said there are also some colleges where tuition reduction may be unneeded. These are colleges that have more of their students paying full price to begin with.

“Clearly for any school that has the ability to command fairly close to their sticker price from a reasonable number of students – 15 to 25 percent – this doesn’t make a lot of sense,” Crockett said.

At least one institution has long experience with dramatic tuition cuts: Muskingum University in Ohio. The university announced it would cut tuition from \$14,000 to \$10,000 for students in 1996. To do so, it reduced financial aid.

The cut helped it attract new students and grow from an institution with about 1,050 full-time undergraduate students to about 1,550, said Jeff Zellers, Muskingum’s longtime vice president for enrollment.

Tuition steadily rose, but it took eight years before it was back to where it had been priced before the cuts were

made, Zellers said. In the meantime, the university was able to attract more students with its lower price tag and, in part, through press coverage and word of mouth.

“It really did at least result in enrollment growth for us, which is exactly what we wanted,” Zellers said.

Now, ironically, Ashland, which shares some of the Ohio market with Muskingum, is trying the same game, and against Muskingum.

Zellers said that even with the price cuts, Ashland will not be cheaper for each and every student, depending on their circumstances -- because of aid packages.

“They are not trying to be cheaper for every single student – or else they will have to have significant budget cuts,” he said.

And, ultimately, he said the price cuts – which, after all, are mostly on paper – are not going to drive down the costs of higher education in general. Those are driven mainly by personnel costs.

“This is not the answer to the cost of higher education – it is not the big picture answer, I will fully admit that, knowing exactly how it works and knowing exactly how beneficial it was

Views Articles

Next Chapter for Affirmative Action

By Matthew Gaertner

The Supreme Court's recent decision may not require colleges to change their practices, but it's another sign they need new approaches, writes Matthew Gaertner.

On April 22, 2014 the U.S. Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Schuetz v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*, upholding Michigan voters' 2006 decision to ban race-based preferences in college admissions. Two immediate consequences of this decision are worth clarifying. First, and most obviously, race-based affirmative action remains prohibited at public universities in Michigan, a state whose population is over 14 percent black but whose flagship public school – the University of Michigan – serves a student body that is only 4 percent black. Second, less obvious and less often emphasized, the Supreme Court opted not to overturn the principle that racial diversity on a college campus is a compelling interest, as it yields unique educational benefits.

In legal terms, race-based affirmative action was left untouched by the *Schuetz* decision. In practical terms, however, the decision could have far-reaching impacts. While there is still nothing unconstitutional about affirmative action, there is now nothing unconstitutional about banning it. That means statewide prohibitions

in California, Washington, Arizona, and Nebraska will remain in place and additional challenges to race-conscious admissions are likely to surface. Moreover, the court's decision in the Michigan case follows a pair of well-publicized campaigns in other states designed to either chip away at remaining affirmative action policies or beat back efforts to revive those that have been outlawed.

These legal and political developments leave higher education leaders in a quandary. Most of us, from Chief Justice John Roberts to John Q. Public, agree racial diversity is a good thing, and worth pursuing. But pursuing it explicitly by considering race in admissions seems to be falling out of favor at the national level and facing voter opposition in some states.

Fortunately, promising alternatives are gaining traction. While it is self-evident that the best way to achieve racial diversity is to select on race, granting college applicants additional consideration on the basis of socioeconomic hardship may represent the next chapter of affirmative action. Class-based admissions preferences have two particularly attractive



Supreme Court of the United States

features. First, they can cushion the racial blow of an affirmative action ban by capitalizing on the overlap between race and socioeconomic status. Just as important, they can boost college access for disadvantaged students of all races who have overcome obstacles few other college applicants have faced.

Research on class-based affirmative action is still in its infancy, but the results thus far seem promising. In nine states where race-conscious policies have been banned and class-based alternatives have taken hold, racial diversity at selective colleges has rebounded after an initial drop. My own research at the University of Colorado demonstrated that class-based admissions considerations – when sufficiently nuanced and faithfully implemented – can maintain racial diversity and identify applicants

who will perform much better in college than their raw academic credentials suggest. Promoting this sort of experimentation seems to be what the Supreme Court has in mind, as the plurality decision reiterated that “universities can and should draw on the most promising aspects of race-neutral alternatives as they develop.”

It should also be emphasized that although the Supreme Court’s ruling in Schuette homed in on admissions decisions, solutions to the economic and racial divide in higher education need not maintain such a narrow focus. For example, the University of California system has developed robust outreach programs to connect with high-achieving low-income middle school students and encourage them to apply to selective universities (nationally, more than 100,000 such students every year do not apply to

selective schools). Like class-based affirmative action, outreach is not a diversity panacea. But without talented low-income applicants, colleges will face a supply problem that no admissions solution – race-based or class-based – can overcome.

I ultimately support considering class and race jointly in admissions as the most obvious, efficient, and logical way to boost socioeconomic and racial diversity. But to the extent the Schuette ruling emboldens new state-level campaigns to ban traditional affirmative action, university leaders should begin investigating workable alternatives that suit their schools’ missions. Beginning that process now will serve selective colleges well as the political landscape continues to change. ■

Matthew Gaertner is a senior research scientist in the Center for College & Career Success at Pearson.

The Disappearing California

By Arturo E. Hernandez

When his daughter finds it easier to get in to and easier to afford an Ivy League university than the University of California, Arturo E. Hernandez wonders what has been lost.

My earliest memories are of looking out from the campanile at the University of California at Berkeley below and the blue sky that surrounded the entire San Francisco Bay Area. Sproul Plaza and bongo drums, Telegraph Avenue and the Hare Krishna, Cody’s Books, Kip’s and Top Dog. These early memories were the

result of the dreams and aspirations my parents had at the time.

Cal Berkeley had been the beacon of higher education that first brought my parents to this country in the early 1960s. Both my maternal and paternal grandfathers had been unable to obtain college educations in Mexico, in part because of tradition and also

due to the limitations at the time. But both of them were self-taught and made sure that their children attended local universities. My father had older siblings who had completed college by the time he came to the United States. My mother was the first to attend college in her family.

Back then the California dream came in three parts. We had the community colleges that served as the entryway for those who were not ready for a four-year university. There was the Cal State system that served as primarily master’s-level and undergraduate teaching institutions. Then there was the University of California.

Shortly after my parents arrived in

California, they enrolled at the local community college. From there they transferred to Berkeley and eventually went on to obtain graduate degrees. My mother received her M.A. in comparative literature and my father eventually received a Ph.D. in the same field.

When the time to apply for college came, I had only two places in mind: Cal and Harvard. I heard early from Cal and was rejected from Harvard. So my choice was clear. In my mind, Cal was the place for me. It was home. But Cal was tough. I remember sitting in my Intro to Chem class with the other 750 students as we watched our professor on TVs that stood above us. Even though the classes were huge, faculty always taught them. And as we moved into upper-division courses these classes grew smaller and smaller to the point of eventually being able to ask our professors questions in groups as small as 50.

My wife, who was the first to go to college in her family, had followed a track to the one my parents used. She heard of college for the first time when she was in high school. When she finished high school, she enrolled at a local community college and transferred to UC Santa Cruz. Eventually, she ended up earning an M.A. in counseling psychology.

My daughter's experience extended our UC experience even further. She was born in La Jolla just before I defended my Ph.D. dissertation at UC San Diego. Her earliest memories are of UC Santa Barbara, where I had my first job and she used to play with

chickens at the Orfalea Children's Center. She had visited Cal with us numerous times and ventured just south to the forest that surrounded UC Santa Cruz, my wife's alma mater. Her early memories had spread beyond the campanile to encompass many more campuses.

When we first moved to Houston 10 years ago, the UC system was still embedded into the household fabric. One day my daughter came home and asked me whether we were Aggies or Longhorns. I quickly replied that we were Golden Bears and Banana Slugs. The next day she came back unsatisfied with my answer and asked again. It was a forced-choice question and so I chose Longhorns. UT was the Cal of Texas so it made sense.

But things have changed in the 30 or so years since my wife and I applied to college. My daughter received hundreds of brochures and emails from universities across the country, some of which I never knew existed. The list under consideration expanded to 11, including UT Austin and the University of Houston, but also some private and some Ivy League institutions.

Decision day arrived in three waves. First came UT and Houston, which were automatic due purely to her class rank. Then there was UCLA, a place made dear to my heart much later in life, when my father Guillermo Hernandez became a professor there. The final wave brought us good news: acceptance into Duke University, Davidson College and the University of Pennsylvania. All were excellent institutions with great reputations. But



it also brought bad news: rejection from Cal.

My daughter and I visited all of the east coast schools where she had been accepted. Penn reminded me of home. It shared a strong commitment to diversity. Like Cal, it sat on the edge of a city with the inner city not far away. It even carries the name of the state and can be named with a single syllable. And like Cal, the multicultural way of life I had experienced during my childhood in California had penetrated its Ivy walls. You can eat Tortas at Penn and any other type of ethnic food you can dream up. But it is still private. Classes are smaller. The surroundings are beautiful and there is Ben sitting on campus. It was clear to me that her experiences would be radically different than the ones my parents, my wife and I had experienced in college.

My daughter's decision came swiftly. She left the Golden Bears and Banana Slugs behind. She bypassed the Longhorns and Cougars completely. She has taken her experience of living

in the most diverse city of the country with her. Along the way she will create a new identity, a native Californian Latina from Houston who will soon be a Penn student, something I never imagined was possible from the top of the campanile all those years ago.

But what of my California dream that had given all of us this opportunity? Is it dead? Over 70,000 applied to Cal and over 85,000 applied to UCLA this year. The acceptance rate has dropped at both places. The campuses are packed and more and more Californians are leaving the golden state to attend college in other places. This trend has reverberated across the entire county a topic of concern that the dean of admissions at Penn, Eric J. Furda, discussed with me during Quaker days.

The irony of it all was that my entire family was educated at what is arguably the best public university system in the world. My daughter could have followed in our footsteps. She was offered admission to UCLA but no financial aid.

In other words, the entire out-of-state cost approximating that of private colleges was to be handled by us. A similar situation occurred at UT. Because Ivy League universities award grants and have a no-loans policy, Penn ended up costing a bit more than UT and much less than UCLA.

The story of our family is not unique. According to a recent book from Suzanne Mettler at Cornell University, college education may actually be reducing the opportunity to create a more level playing field. The ability

both economically and socially to climb the academic ladder is becoming more and more restricted.

This reality is difficult to reconcile for someone who grew up in the public university system and teaches at one as well. The American higher educational system has opened up doors for my family. I feel incredibly fortunate to have a daughter who will attend an Ivy League university.

However, I cannot help but wonder what the future of public university education holds for those who aspire to climb the academic ladder the way that my family has. ■

Arturo E. Hernandez is professor of psychology and director of the developmental cognitive neuroscience graduate program at the University of Houston.

Why We Need College Ratings

By Carrie Warick

We must give students and families the right kind of information -- about multiple factors, and not blended into a single institutional rating -- about one of the most expensive purchases they will ever make, writes Carrie Warick.

The more expensive a purchase, the more important it is to be a smart consumer. Many Americans value labeling and rankings from food (nutrition labels) to appliances (energy ratings) to vehicles (gas mileage and crash safety) to health plans (Obamacare's bronze, silver, gold, and platinum). Yet for one of the most

expensive purchases a person will ever make – a college education – there is a dearth of reliable and meaningful comparable information.

In August 2013, President Obama directed the U.S. Department of Education to develop a federal college ratings system with two goals: (1) to serve as a college search tool for

students and (2) to function as an accountability measure for institutions of higher education.

Under the president's proposal, ratings will be available for consumer use in 2015, and by 2018, they would be tied to the colleges' receipt of federal student aid. Many colleges and universities have been protesting ever since, especially about the accountability goal.

But improving the information imbalance about higher education outcomes is a key step toward improving graduation rates and slowing the rise in student loan debt. Although accountability mechanisms are a complex issue that may well take somewhat longer than 2018 to develop,

student advocates agree on the following: We must move forward now with the multifactor rating information that higher education consumers desperately need. Furthermore, the administration's rating system should provide comparable data on several factors relevant to college choice so that students can choose which are most important to them, rather than imposing the government's judgment about which handful of factors should be combined into a single institutional rating.

As we evaluate the case for federal consumer ratings, let's first set aside the 15 percent of college students who attend the most selective institutions and enjoy generally very high graduation rates. They may feel well-served by rankings like Barron's and U.S. News, which emphasize reputation, financial resources, and admissions selectivity.

But for the 85 percent of students who attend non- or less-selective institutions, the institution they choose has far greater consequences. For these "post-traditional" students, college choice could mean the difference between dropping out with an unmanageable debt load or graduating with a degree and moving on to a satisfying career.

To share a real example, consider three Philadelphia universities: a suburban private, a Catholic private, and an urban state. These institutions are all within 30 miles, enroll students with similar academic characteristics, and serve similar percentages of Pell-

eligible students. If you are a local, low-income student of color who wants to attend college close to home, how should you decide where to go?

What if you knew that the suburban private school's graduation rate for underrepresented minority students (31 percent) scored much lower than the Catholic private (54 percent) and urban state school (61 percent)? Or that the urban state and private Catholic schools have lower net prices for low-income students? Would that affect your choice? (Thanks to Education Trust's College Results Online for these great data.)

A rating system with multiple measures (rather than a single one) could greatly help this student. Armed with facts about comparable graduation rates, admissions criteria, and net prices, she can investigate her options further, ask informed questions, and ultimately make a stronger decision about which institution is the best fit for her

A ratings system designed for the 85 percent of students going to less-selective institutions will help students get the information most important to them. Many consumer rating schemas include multiple measures. Car buyers can compare fuel efficiency, price and safety ratings as well as more subjective ratings of comfort or "driver experience" from a variety of sources. Some buy Honda Civics for gas mileage and safety, others choose more expensive options for luxury features or handling.

Similarly, prospective college

students need to know not just about accessibility/selectivity (average GPA, SAT/ACT scores), but also about affordability (net price by income tier, average student loan debt, ability to repay loans) and accountability (graduation rates by race and by income).

The information should be sortable by location (to aid place-bound students) and by institution type (two-year, four-year, public, private) for students to compare side by side.

The data to fuel the rating system are for the most part already available, although some are in need of improvement.

As is now widely acknowledged, we must change the federal calculation of graduation rates as soon as possible to account for part-time and transfer students, and we must collect and report institutional Pell Grant recipient graduation rates as part of the federal data system (IPEDS). Over the long term, we should also find a valid way to assess work force outcomes for students.

But let's not delay a ratings system that will serve students any further. Once the system is up and running, we can turn to the more complex and politically difficult question of how to use federal financial aid dollars to incentivize better institutional outcomes. ■

Carrie Warick is director of partnerships and policy at the National College Access Network, which advocates on behalf of low-income and underrepresented students.

My Ride to the Airport

By Nate Kreuter

Nate Kreuter reflects on how some chance encounters made him feel welcome at a large university -- and pointed him forward.

I was a lousy high school student. I graduated ranked three spots from the bottom half of my class, half-assing even my underachievement. I never had much interest in high school academically and so, I thought, no interest in college. And I didn't go to college right away, not really. I took a few meandering courses at the local community college and worked for \$6.50 an hour in a local camera shop. But after six months of that work, barely covering expenses in a shared rental house and all the while hearing about my friends' college experiences, my motivation changed. I wanted to go to college, but was still anxious about whether or not I could hack it.

I applied to several colleges, all with a mind toward getting very far from my home in Virginia. One of the places I applied to was the University of Iowa. Generously, my mother bought me a plane ticket to go visit the university in February. I had never even been to Iowa before. Just prior to my departure I told one of my former high school teachers about my upcoming trip. She suggested that I should look up an old colleague of hers who had once worked at my high school during my visit to the University of Iowa, where he worked at the time of my trip. I said I would and didn't think much of it. It

was one of those things you say you'll do to be polite, but without ever really intending to follow through.

The time for my trip arrived. I had never flown alone before and dozed on the plane during the trip to Iowa, but I woke suddenly when the pilot announced our descent into the Cedar Rapids airport. Cedar Rapids? Where was that? I knew that the university was in Iowa City, and had, in my naiveté, simply assumed that I was arriving in Iowa City. The airline ticket had listed my destination, somewhat ambiguously, as simply Cedar Rapids/Iowa City. I hadn't made any arrangements ahead of time except to reserve a spot at a hostel for the nights of my visit.

When I startled-to on the plane, my knowledge of Iowa geography was so absent that I didn't even know how far apart the two cities were. Three miles? Three hours? My worries amplified when I began to consider my budget. I had about \$100 in cash to pay for my lodging, my meals, for anything that might come up, no credit or ATM cards. An expensive cab ride or shuttle trip would bite into my already meager funds.

Somewhere in between disembarking from the plane and the baggage claim I figured out, I think from

a wall map, that the distance between Iowa City and Cedar Rapids was about 30 miles. That was the distance I needed to cover. I took stock of my options. A 30-mile cab ride was out of the question. I would inquire about shuttles after I grabbed my bag. If I couldn't find a shuttle, I decided that I would hitchhike. I had no appointments scheduled until the next day. I also had never hitchhiked before.

At the baggage claim most of my fellow passengers were rumpled businessmen in rumpled businessman clothes. While I waited, I struck up a conversation with a young woman who looked to be about my age. It turned out that she was a junior at the university, and had been on the same connecting flight that I had. She was an actuarial science major (I nodded knowingly but had to look that one up later) and was returning from Boston where she had been interviewing for an internship.

In the course of our awkward waiting-for-bags conversation, I managed to bring up my transportation dilemma.

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

I told her about the makeshift hostel in the Methodist church downtown. Unsurprisingly, she hadn't heard of it. I must have seemed worthy of pity because, to my shock, she offered to give me a lift all the way into Iowa City. Naturally, I accepted. We left the baggage claim after an airline worker informed me that my bag had been left behind during my connection in Chicago and would have to be delivered to me later.

En route to her car, which was parked in one of the long-term lots, we made

polite conversation, which primarily consisted of me asking questions about the university and the city. At one point she, having learned where I was from, asked what it was like growing up so close to Charlottesville, Virginia and the University of Virginia.

I told her that it was great, particularly if you stayed the hell away from the fratty parts of town. I launched into an abbreviated (for me) tirade against the entitled, east coast “Greek” culture that galled me when I was a townie high school student. (Still galls me some.)

Thus began an important lesson for me in knowing one’s audience before responding pointedly to an innocuous question.

The young woman stopped, turned directly to me, and glared. Despite the numbingly cold Iowa winter day, I thought for a moment that I could feel piles of plowed snow in the parking lot melting behind me from the heat. “I’m the vice-president of my sorority,” she said slowly, deliberately, before turning away from me completely and continuing toward her car.

For a moment I didn’t know whether or not to keep following, but I did. Her initial congeniality never returned, but she still gave me a ride into Iowa City, and we returned to talking mechanically about the university for the duration of the 35 minute ride. Once in Iowa City, she dropped me off in front of the Methodist church where I was staying and wished me luck before I thanked her for the ride and we went our separate ways.

The hostel was really just a bunch of cots set up in the church’s activity room.

During the day the cots were folded up, packed into a corner, and the room was used for various church activities. So, the “hostel,” while accommodating my budget, wasn’t a place I could go crash at during the daytime. Those of us staying there were only allowed in during the evenings, basically during sleeping hours.

Even though I was only in town for two full days, I had a lot of open time to fill, and not much money to help out. And it was very, very cold, at least to my thin blood.

For lunch one day I went into a little pizza joint that, unbeknownst to me, was an Iowa City institution, at least among students, named The Airliner. It was a little past the normal lunch hour and nearly deserted. The hostess seated me in a booth next to a family. The father looked vaguely familiar. Red, balding hair, and an unmistakably obvious limp when he rose to go to the restroom. Then it dawned on me — he was Dan Gable, the collegiate and Olympic wrestling legend and the then-recently retired coach of the Iowa wrestling team. I waited for what seemed like an opportune moment to interrupt his meal, and found it as he and his family were finishing up and preparing to leave.

“Excuse me, are you Dan Gable?” I asked.

“You must be a wrestler,” he said, knowing both the scope and the limits of his own fame.

“I used to be,” I replied, knowing that I didn’t have the talent to walk-on to a team like Iowa’s. Wrestling might have been the only thing that kept me from

dropping out of high school, which I seriously considered at one point.

Gable graciously introduced me to his family, including the hostess, who turned out to be his oldest daughter. He signed an autograph on a paper napkin for me to take back to my old high school coach. Then, creaking out of the restaurant on his mostly-destroyed hip, he followed his family out into the street. I paid my check and went back out into the Iowa cold and wind a few minutes later.

After two days of wandering Iowa City in the bitter cold, I had done everything constructive I could think of. I had met with advisers in the English department, as well as a university admissions officer. I had wandered through bookstores without buying anything for slightly longer than was polite, and walked around the city bundled up against the cold for as long as I could stand. I was such a rube, in fact, that I didn’t even realize that, simply to stay warm, I could have hung out in the university library’s periodicals room for hours. I didn’t know such places existed, and that you could just walk right into them.

Partly out of boredom, and partly as an indoor project to stay warm, I decided to go in search of my high school teacher’s grad school friend and former colleague.

I knew he was in the School of Education, and went to the education building, Lindquist Center, which is a rat’s maze of a university building, vexing even to some of those who know it well. After some time navigating the building’s counterintuitively arrayed



halls, I arrived at the office that had been listed as James Marshall's on the directory in the lobby. The office door was open. A man was hunched over several boxes of books in the middle of the floor, either packing or unpacking. I couldn't tell which.

I knocked on the frame of the open door. "Excuse me, Dr. Marshall?"

"No," the man replied, with a look that must have reflected my own confusion. "He's in the dean's office now," he said with a tilt of his head, both of his hands still full of books. He gave me directions for navigating to the other office.

I, of course, had no idea what a dean was. My ignorance was my shield, and I continued down the hall to the dean's office, not only unaware of who or what a dean was, but also unaware of the fact that many people typically work

in a dean's office, which is more like an administrative compound than the more humble faculty office I had just visited.

When I entered the much larger dean's office/compound, no fewer than three faces of the secretarial/admin variety turned from their work to look at me. "Could I please see Dr. Marshall?" I asked, quickly, and I thought cleverly, deducing that none of these three women were him.

"Do you have an appointment?" their leader asked.

I stammered. "Uh, no, I just want to talk to him."

This, judging from her reaction, was an answer that does not typically win one an audience with busy, important folks. Luckily for me, Marshall's office door had been open the entire time,

and he had been listening in.

"Is that a student?" he nearly shouted, still unseen to me. "Send him in." The captain of the secretaries nodded in my direction. I proceeded forward.

I went into the office, and gregariously, Marshall asked what he could help with. Little did he know, he was already helping — his office was heated.

Falteringly I explained that I was visiting the university and had been a student at Western Albemarle High School, and that Kathy Sublette had suggested I look him up.

He beamed. He asked me about my high school, where he had once worked, almost 20 years previously.

I had to talk around those questions, for, with a few notable exceptions,

like Sublette's class, my experiences hadn't been very good. In the course of our conversation I told him about my mixup at the airport and the young woman who had given me a ride into town.

"How are you getting back?" he asked.

"Well," I told him, "I heard there's a shuttle, but it doesn't run early enough to make my flight. So, I figured I'd go up tonight and just sleep in the airport."

He grimaced a little. "The Cedar Rapids airport is pretty small. They close at night. They aren't going to let you sleep there."

"Oh." As I said, I was pretty naïve.

"What time is your flight?" he asked.

"6:30am."

"Hm, United? You connect in Chicago?"

"Yeah," I responded.

"I've taken that flight a million times. Brutal. Where are you staying?" he asked.

I told him about the weird hostel in the Methodist church.

"Tell you what," he said. "Be ready at

5. I'll pick you up."

"Really?" I was incredulous.

He assured me that it was no problem, and we made a bit more small talk before I left. Things were looking up.

Right on time the next morning Marshall picked me up. During the ride in the morning dark, our conversation was a bit more earnest, and I opened up about my anxieties as to whether or not I could hack college work.

Marshall told me about his own experiences as a first-generation college student at Indiana University. He assured me that Iowa was a really down-to-earth university, with really down-to-earth students, like the one who had given me a ride. I could hack it, he assured me.

At the airport I thanked him repeatedly. I had a lot to think about. He made a good pitch, but, my god, that cold wind.

Iowa was the only university I was accepted to as an undergraduate. I began attending the following fall.

I'm hesitant to try to draw a lesson

from any of this. I don't want to suggest that what Marshall did for me should be a standard by which we measure ourselves. It was so above and beyond, such an act of generosity, that few of us could live up to such a standard. As important as the ride was, the conversation we had during it, about college life and my own fears, which were based on my mostly horrible high school experiences, was even more important.

What I do know is that both acts of generosity -- a ride offered by a student, another ride and some sound advice offered by senior faculty member -- were emblematic of everything that happened for me at Iowa over the next three years. Everywhere I turned, someone helped me out, from staff in admissions and the registrar's office to the faculty in the English department, as well as faculty in other departments.

Thanks, everyone. ■

Nate Kreuter is an assistant professor of English at Western Carolina University and a career advice columnist for Inside Higher Ed.

Cover images provided by
[istock.com](https://www.istock.com)



Inside Higher Ed
1015 18th St NW Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20036
[insidehighered.com](https://www.insidehighered.com)