

# Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today  
Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

### College Application and Admission

Increasingly, the most selective colleges are using “holistic” approaches to admitting students in an effort to create diverse college communities and more opportunities for under-served students. This new orientation calls for new approaches as well as the strengthening of academic programs for all.

A White House report (Wu, 2014) striking for its candor states that overall gains in college attainment has stalled. In 1990, the US ranked first in college attainment; today, the nation ranks 12<sup>th</sup>.

Further, college access and attainment remain unequal. Half of the people from high income families have bachelors’ degrees by age 25, while just 1 in 10 from low income families do. Ironically, low income students are the ones who tend to benefit the most from a college degree. “When children born into the bottom fifth of the income distribution get a college degree, their chances of making it to the top nearly quadruple, and their chances of making it out of the bottom increase by more than 50 percent.” (Wu, 2014. p. 3)

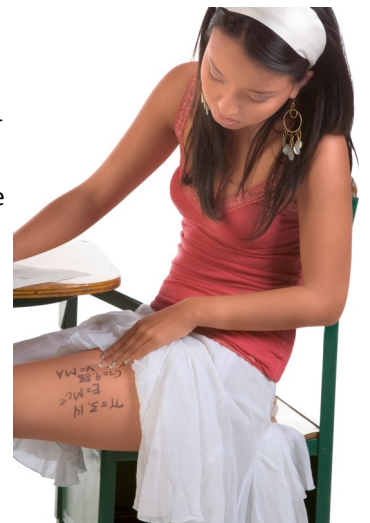
#### **Barriers for Low Income Students**

The barriers for low income students are formidable, but, increasingly, it is not just lack of funds that prevent college attendance or ultimate success. Three key barriers are identified in the White House report.

**Low Income Students Tend to “Undermatch” in Selecting Colleges.** Relative to their high-income peers, low-income students are less likely to attend colleges and universities that give them the best chances of success – that is, many low-income students choose a college that does not match their academic ability. Students who attend selective institutions, which tend to have more resources available for student supports, have better education outcomes, even after controlling for student ability. Only 8% of high achieving, low income students select a school that matches their academic ability.

**There is a Limited Pool of Low Income Students Preparing for College.** Schools need to reach students earlier to increase the pool of low-income students ready for college. Academic achievement in 8<sup>th</sup> grade is one of the best predictors of college readiness; indeed, some studies show that academic achievement in 8<sup>th</sup> grade has a bigger impact on readiness than high school achievement. Promising interventions to increase the pool include summer enrichment programs and college visits, promoting a strong college-going culture in middle- and high-schools, early exposure to STEM education, and helping students understand their financial aid eligibility so they know college can be affordable.

**Inequalities Exist in Advising and Test Preparation.** Low income students have less access to counselors. High schools serving predominately minority and poor students have student-counselor ratios double the national average – 1000 students per counselor versus 470 nationwide. Also, students who pay for additional counseling and test preparation are likely to have higher grades, higher SAT scores, and come from families with higher incomes.



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### The Key is Information and Encouragement

Access to good information about college selection and college success is crucial. Information, coupled with a “you can do this” attitude that permeates the school, creates a college-going culture that propels students toward post-secondary education. Counselors are a critical piece of this culture, but so too are teachers – all of whom are college graduates, and many of whom come from low-income backgrounds. They can be models, advisors, and coaches for students negotiating the path to college.

**“But I can’t afford it.”** One of the most persistent and inaccurate bits of misinformation is that low income students can’t afford college. As a result, quite early in their school programs, students may decide that college is out of reach and abandon any aspirations for higher education. Some intervention programs are having success by providing students and their families with age-appropriate information about college access and funding as early as middle school.

**“I’ll have to leave home to go to college.”** Maybe, maybe not. While this may be more of a parental concern, especially among families with no prior college experience, it also shapes student views as well. But more programs in which students can earn transferrable college credits are being delivered through local community colleges or even area high schools. These allow students to remain at home for the first year or two and ease the transition to college.

**“I’m only going to apply to one college and see what happens.”** What happens probably won’t be good. Two-thirds of students apply to only one school – one that may not be the right match or offering the best deal. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “By focusing on only one school, students run the risk of being turned down for admission or losing out on better financial aid and educational opportunities from another school, with ramifications that can last a lifetime.”

**“There’s too much paperwork.”** Yes there is. And many schools are working hard to fix that problem. The biggest challenge is often the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and multiple applications. Coaching students and families through the FAFSA process is one of the best things high schools can do to promote college attendance. Further, the [Common Application](#) allows students to complete one form and direct it to any one of 625 participating colleges. And within a state, most of the public universities request similar information, so it is possible for students to apply to several with minimal effort.

### Academic Matters

Virtually all 4 year colleges require some version of the “college-prep 15” – the courses that comprise a college preparatory curriculum: 4 years of English, 3 years of Mathematics (sometimes beyond Algebra 1), 3 years of social studies, 3 years of science (including laboratory sciences), and 2 years of a world language. Increasingly, colleges are looking at the course load taken in the senior year as well, and may require a copy of the student’s senior schedule if he or she is applying at the end of the junior year.

After making sure that students understand the reality of college attendance and how college can be possible for them, the most important thing schools can do is assure that students have access to and support for success in a rigorous academic curriculum. Cohort programs, tutoring and mentoring programs (often provided by community volunteers or outside agencies), and enriched academic experiences help to build the academic credentials and abilities needed for college admission and ultimate success.

Luna de la Rosa and Tierney’s *Breaking Through the Barriers* contains dozens of ideas for how to support both a college-going culture and student success in a rigorous curriculum. The Institute for Higher Education Policy’s Tactical Handbook, *Ensuring Academic Readiness and Academic System Alignment for All Students* provides a comprehensive plan and model for supporting student success in a solid academic program.

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### Tell Your Story

Research by Bastedo and Bowman (2015) demonstrates that providing detailed information about high school contexts significantly increased the likelihood that admissions officers would recommend admitting low SES students. By putting a student's academic achievement in context, admissions officers get a more complete picture of a student's motivation, how she responds to challenges, and what kinds of barriers she had to overcome to complete her diploma. In Oregon, UO gives students the opportunity to submit a second essay detailing exactly these kinds of variables. In other cases, a cover letter prepared by a school administrator or counselor might accompany student applications.

### Smart Phones

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), 'smartphones are widely used for navigating numerous important life activities, from researching a health condition to accessing educational resources. Lower-income and "smartphone-dependent" users are especially likely to turn to their phones for navigating job and employment resources.' Further, "those with relatively low income and educational attainment levels, younger adults, and non-whites are especially likely to be "smartphone-dependent."

This means that lower income students are more likely to try to manage the college application and admissions process, including preparing essays, with a smart phone or hand held device. Because applications, FAFSA forms, and other necessary documents may not be compatible with a mobile device, frustration can mount and costly mistakes made. Many schools now open computer labs specifically for students and parents to complete the college application process, providing coaches and mentors who can help with complex forms.

### Changing Expectations Among Most Selective Colleges

A recent report from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, *Turning the Tide*, suggests that college admission requirements may be part of the cause of numerous adolescent problems, including a lack of compassion. The report claims that college admissions offices send powerful messages to millions of students about what is important and what isn't. Now, according to NY *Times* writer Frank Bruni, "It asks colleges to send a clear message that admissions officers won't be impressed by more than a few Advanced Placement courses. Poorer high schools aren't as likely to offer A.P. courses, and a heavy load of them is often cited as a culprit in sleep deprivation, anxiety and depression among students at richer schools."

"The report also suggests that colleges discourage manic résumé padding by accepting information on a sharply limited number of extracurricular activities; that they better use essays and references to figure out which students' community-service projects are heartfelt and which are merely window dressing; and that they give full due to the family obligations and part-time work that some underprivileged kids take on."

### In Oregon

Oregon colleges, especially the most selective ones, follow the trend identified in the national literature – with more "holistic" admissions assessments based on both academic and non-academic variables.

All of the state's 4 year colleges require students to complete some version of the 15 college prep courses listed here with a grade of at least C- or higher.

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- 4 years of English composition and literature, with an emphasis on expository writing
- 3 years of mathematics, including Algebra II and higher, with a fourth course recommended in the Senior year
- 3 years of science, including two fields, with one year of laboratory science recommended
- 3 years of social studies
- 2 years of a second language (with a variety of options for fulfilling this requirement)

All of the 4 year colleges also require SAT or ACT scores, although not all of them specify minimum or cut-off scores. Western Oregon University, Portland State, and Eastern Oregon specify a mix of SAT/ACT scores and grade point averages, so that students with lower scores can qualify for admission on the basis of their GPA and *vice versa*.

UO and OSU do not specify minimum scores; instead, they use them as data points in determining academic performance and potential, and their entering student profiles show the test score range of their admitted classes. UO lists the criteria they use in making admissions decisions as follows:

“When making an admission decision we consider the following criteria:

- strength of academic course work
- grades earned
- grade trend
- standardized test scores
- senior-year course load
- motivation as demonstrated in the application essay
- extracurricular activities including community service and the need to work to assist your family
- ability to enhance the diversity of the university
- academic potential  
special talents”

OSU lists similar criteria.

“Strength of Curriculum:

- Quality, quantity, and level of coursework throughout the entire high school program, especially coursework completed beyond the minimum courses required (see high school course requirements chart).
- AP, IB or college coursework completed or in progress.
- Strength of the program taken within the context of the high school attended.  
Completion of a progressively challenging math sequence, demonstrated by performance.

Academic Performance:

- Preferred cumulative grade point average of 3.0 and completion of 15 required subject area courses.  
Class rank taken in context with academic rigor and class size of high school attended.

Insight Resume:

- Understanding of you as a unique, contributing individual.
- Your accomplishments, perspectives, experiences, and talents.
- Your achievements within the context of your social and personal circumstances.

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- Participation in activities that develop academic, intellectual, and leadership abilities.”

Both UO and OSU state, explicitly, that, while looking for academically able students, they are also interested in creating a diverse university community.

UO encourages applicants to use their personal application essay to lay out their unique qualifications and abilities. “The UO is interested in learning more about you. Write an essay of 500 words or less that shares information that we cannot find elsewhere on your application. Any topic you choose is welcome. Some ideas you might consider include your future ambitions and goals, a special talent, extracurricular activity, or unusual interest that sets you apart from your peers, or a significant experience that influenced your life. If you are applying to the UO's Robert D. Clark Honors College, feel free to resubmit your honors college application essay.”

They also encourage students to provide a second, optional essay that explains their life experience and what the potential student brings to the university community. “As you’ve looked into what it will be like to attend Oregon, you’ve hopefully learned about what makes Ducks Ducks. No two are alike, though, so tell us what makes you you, and how that connects to our campus community. We are interested in your thoughts and experiences recognizing difference and supporting equity and inclusion, and choosing one of these two options will guide you in sharing those thoughts. You can learn more about equity and inclusion at Oregon by visiting the Equity and Inclusion website. Maximum statement length is 500 words. This statement is not required.”

OSU also describes a holistic view of applicants in making admissions decisions. “Oregon State's admission requirements promote student success by assessing student preparedness and academic potential in the unique context of each student's personal experience. Admission assessment will consider all achievements, both academic and non-academic, to enroll students with a broad range of characteristics and perspectives. Considerations include, but are not limited to: academic achievement, creativity, initiative, motivation, leadership, persistence, service to others, intellectual curiosity, exceptional personal or academic recognition, unusual talent or ability, substantial experience with other cultures, and ability to overcome significant challenges.”

“Please note that academic performance is not the sole criterion for admission to the university. The university may evaluate a person's behavior and background to determine their ability to maintain the standards of academic and professional conduct expected at the university. An evaluation may take into consideration current behavior and performance as well as past experiences and actions. Simply qualifying for admission does not guarantee admission.”

### **Private Colleges**

Private institutions voice similar positions on admission. All seek diversity and to build a rich intellectual and college community. Lewis and Clark’s statement is typical, “When admitting new students, our admissions staff look for individuals from diverse backgrounds, with diverse talents and interests – students who will not only meet the rigorous academic challenges of a Lewis & Clark education, but will also take full advantage of the opportunities for individual achievement and growth offered here.”

“The committee also looks for students who will contribute to our community – as musicians, leaders, athletes, or community service participants, just to name a few – while they are succeeding academically.”

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All request recommendations, and some, like Lewis and Clark, suggest a personal interview for unique circumstances. "Personal Interviews may be most helpful for students who have a circumstance best explained in a personal conversation, or who have specific questions. Interviews may take place on campus or as admissions staff travel around the country."

### **Community Colleges**

Oregon has a large and comprehensive community college system that offers both career preparation and the first two years of a 4 year program for students anticipating transfer to a 4 year school. Admission to Oregon community colleges is "open" to students who have a high school diploma.

In addition to their own technical and career-oriented programs, most of the colleges also suggest that, for many students whose high school records are non-competitive for admission to a 4 year school, the community college is a way to build skills and academic credentials that will help qualify them for admission upon completion of their A. A. or A. S. degrees.

### **The Bottom Line**

In Oregon, as in other states, both public and private colleges are embracing a more holistic form of assessment of student potential for success at their institution. This suggests that advising students, especially first-generation college applicants, is a somewhat more complex task than simply picking the right courses and helping with the paperwork. It now includes the development of a personal narrative that places the student's academic performance in the context of their life experiences, culture, and personal qualities. Indeed, the most competitive colleges are the ones leading the initiative to develop more complete and complex profiles of potential students in order to assure that they build a community, not just a collection of really smart people.

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