

How to Win the New College Admission Game

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The Takeaways

1. A good insider's review of the new college application game reveals that the nation's selective colleges have gained more market power and face less uncertainty in attracting their desired applicants.
2. However, this comes at the expense of college applicants, each of whom has a weakened chance to be selected first and foremost by the expanded pool of applicants to prestigious colleges.
3. Collectively, college applicants have also been placed in a disadvantaged position by recent changes in standardized tests, by the Supreme Court's decision ending race-based affirmative action, by the new trend of early admissions, and even by the exploding financial aid system.
4. Asking colleges to clearly state admission criteria is a task a lot harder than it may appear. It is not that selective colleges are all intentionally playing a "hide-and-seek" game, but rather that they are driven by a fierce competition with each other and worried that listing and publishing fixed criteria might make them vulnerable.

5. A big problem with selection by resumes is that they present a brief overview of work experience, failing to showcase a candidate's personality, creativity, or problem-solving abilities in a more comprehensive way.
6. Startup teams are similar to college applicants: They both aim at impressing their target audience for the desired outcome. But in the new age of GenAI, they both should be allowed to enter more data than resumes and timed presentations. This benefits both sides of the selection by making it more balanced with more comprehensive evaluations.
7. How can applicants play a fundamentally new game of college applications in the age of GenAI? It has much to do with producing, accumulating and presenting more data.
8. Since the machine will do the reading and scanning for us, a larger dataset of applicants' data only helps AI algorithms learn from a wider range of examples, leading to more accurate pattern recognition and more robust models.
9. A case study of a college applicant with a perfect ACT score but is rejected by her dream schools will be used to illustrate the points.

“ Never record your achievements as isolated *events*, but rather as annotated, continuously updated, verifiable, and meticulously documented *processes*, subject only to your desired interpretation. ”

An intriguing insider’s account on college applications & admissions sparked my interest, prompting this long-overdue post.

1 Findings & Facts Inside College Admission

An interesting opinion essay by Daniel Currell, who served as Deputy Under-Secretary and Senior Advisor at the Department of Education from 2018 to 2021, was published in the New York Times on May 1, 2024. This essay is highly recommended for all parents with college bound kids graduating from high school, school counselors, college admissions committee members, financial aid office personnel, or simply anyone and everyone interested in the topic.

According to Currell, the 2023-24 college admissions season is special as “the old rules didn’t apply and even the gatekeepers seemed not to know what the new rules were.”

In case you have no time to read the whole essay, I will highlight the key points/facts from Currell:

1. The so-called Ivy-Plus schools — the eight members of the Ivy League plus MIT, Duke, Chicago and Stanford — collectively received about 175,000 applications in 2002. But in 2022, the most recent year for which totals are available, they got more than 590,000 (up by 237%), with only a few thousand more available spots.
2. The Ivy-Plus schools enroll less than 1% of America’s roughly 15 million undergraduates. If we include all colleges that only accept less than a quarter

of applicants, we're still talking about only 6% of undergraduates.

3. While the easiest way to alleviate the traffic jam is to apply to schools that offer an excellent education but are not luxury brands, getting into a good and selective school does seem to pay off. In 2023, 15 of 32 Rhodes scholars came from the Ivies, 9 from Harvard alone. We just don't know if this is due to selection or education.
4. Applicants are getting better with taking standardized tests. In 2002, the nation produced 134 perfect ACT scores; in 2023 there were 2,542.
5. In the past, colleges operated on the same calendar to give students the time to consider *all* offers before picking one. Now, the most powerful schools do pretty much whatever they wanted.
6. Early admission was a niche market, but now getting more popular, especially for selective colleges.
7. The COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges to waive standardized testing requirements, leading to a tripling of applicants for selective institutions. This has strengthened their market power in selecting students, but conversely, it has also reduced the chances of individual applicants gaining admission.
8. The Supreme Court's decision ending race-based affirmative action left colleges scrambling for new ways to preserve diversity.
9. The whole financial aid system exploded into spectacular disarray this year, delaying the information if they can afford college.
10. Ivy Wydler, a kid from an upper-middle class family, took the ACT at her sophomore year and got a perfect score — on her first try. Yet she was rejected by Duke, her dream school, in the early decision round. Ivy was also

rejected by Vanderbilt, Stanford, Columbia and the University of Southern California.

11. The reason: This year, over 54,000 competed for only 1,750 seats at Duke. The 6,000 early decision applicants were three times more likely to get in.
12. Today, students still take SAT/ACT like before the pandemic, but far fewer disclose their scores. They submit scores only if they were above the school's reported median, a pattern that causes that median to be recalibrated higher and higher each year.
13. Currell believes institutions that receive federal funds, which include all elite colleges, should be required to clearly state their admissions criteria.
14. Colleges should also not be allowed to make anyone decide whether to attend without knowing what it will actually cost, and they should not be allowed to offer better odds to those who forgo that information.

2 Commenting Currell

Currell's essay reveals much thoughtfulness of an insider, who is capable of connecting many dots together.

Asking educational institutes with federal funds to clearly state admission criteria is a task a lot harder than it may sound. It is not that selective colleges are playing a "hide-and-seek" on purpose, but rather because of competition that drives them around and nobody wants to make themselves vulnerable by enlisting concrete and fixed criteria.

Concrete and fixed criteria are possible only when all players agreed on a static game with fixed rules and conducts. But that is impossible, as Currell

himself points out, with changes made by the Supreme Court, the pandemics, and legal battles.

We are all in a *dynamic* game of college admission, and we should expect that to continue in the future.

I do agree with Currell's second proposal that "Colleges should also not be allowed to make anyone decide whether to attend without knowing what it will actually cost." This makes sense because money is always an important part of decision-making.

I'm not overly concerned about selective colleges having too much power, which is simply driven by the vast increase in the number of applicants, making their job easier to pick the best from a bigger pool.

The right question for the applicants to ask is how to strengthen themselves and win the new game of college application. In the old days, making their resumes shinning is the name of the game. Now evidences point to a new direction: It is not just resumes, but how admission committees interpret the resumes that matter even more.

I will come back to this point later. But first, I want to switch to something seemingly totally different: Startup team presentations.

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3 Consider Startup Presentations

I went to the entrepreneurial event last Friday (May 3rd, 2024) hosted by SCET (Sutardja Center for Entrepreneurship & Technology) for its Collider Cup XIV

event. As one investor points out, this year we have seen a far more impressive cohort of startups than the past.

3.1 A Unique Startup Team

I just want to highlight one particular team that was the last presenter of the event. I forget its name (and can't find them on the SCET website) but interestingly, after all presentations were done, the hosting SCET professor made a comment on the last team in terms of their financial stake being too small. Yet minutes later, the team was voted by the audience to win the first prize, which automatically qualifies them to the SkyDeck, the prestigious startup accelerator at UC Berkeley.

I do agree with the professor's comment, but also notice one thing that presumably contributed to their popular voting victory: They were in a "live show" mode, in which one team member introduced the main presenter, who did not show up at first but jumped on the stage in front of all the audience and started talking.

Apparently this sets the team apart from others and leaves a good audience impression.

3.2 What If Startups Are Allowed More Ways to Present

That startup team is not competing for college, but their story is entirely relevant for high schoolers vying for a seat at an elite college: They are both fighting for attention and creating a good impression for a targeted audience.

Assuming the SCET professor has a valid criticism of the team, then the audience may have given too much weight to the *form* of presentation than to the *content*.

It is clear however that we cannot, and should not, blame the voting audience, who have the right to choose whichever team they like. They are always right, and we can't argue with their choices and decisions.

The question is how or what we can do to make the selection process more balanced, more efficient and less biased.

The way to go is to provide more information for the audience or authority to look and to consider. Back to the startup competition, the way the showcase or competition is run right now is for every team to have 5 minutes of presentation, followed by questions from the investors. There is a time-keeper to remind teams how much time they have left, like 1 minute or 30 seconds.

I am not a native speaker and have never been particularly strong in listening comprehension. I must admit that sometimes it's hard for me to capture and to remember what the teams are trying to say or have said. Without full knowledge of the project, I sometimes rate them based on obvious signs like the team composition, how impressive and confident the team appears, how clearly and loudly the speakers are, and sometimes how tall team members are (!), as tall people look better on the stage.

Most items listed above are still fair game because they are legitimate dimensions used to judge teams. Having said that, I do wish I knew more about the substance or contents than forms.

Imagine the scenario when all startup teams put their projects on a single 8 x 11 letter paper and distribute them among the audience ahead of the presentation. That way, the audience would be better informed and have something to look at and to refer back to, other than just listening to several complete strangers talking.

I don't know how native speakers would feel, but I know I definitely would appreciate it. In fact, I would keep some info sheets for my personal record.

4 The Old Game of Resume Centered Applications

The same idea (of not betting everything on that five minute oral presentation) applies to the college application, except with a different format. Since colleges won't give applicants a chance for oral presentation, in the old days, college application is basically a game of one's own words. Applicants work on their resumes, and making them as polish as possible.

4.1 Problems with Resumes

But there are weaknesses and problems. For one thing, resumes often prioritize past job titles and responsibilities, potentially overlooking transferable skills or a candidate's natural (or trained) talent for learning new things. This can be a disadvantage for recent graduates or those changing careers.

Resumes can also be susceptible to *unconscious bias* based on names, schools, or previous employers. I remember one conversation I had with a passenger when I was driving Uber, she told me her parents purposely named her "Alex" so employers can't really tell whether she is a male or female by her first name.

A potentially bigger problem with resumes is that they typically present a brief overview of work experience, failing to showcase a candidate's personality, creativity, or problem-solving abilities in a more comprehensive way.

Finally, resumes rely on self-reported information, and there might be a tendency to exaggerate accomplishments or inflate responsibilities.

Better qualified candidates might be overlooked when their resumes do not perfectly match the job description keywords.

4.2 Partial Solutions to Resume Problems

Partial solutions include skill based resumes that highlight relevant skills and experiences quantified with metrics.

Short video introductions also allow candidates to showcase their personality, communication skills, and enthusiasm for the opportunity.

Developers and creative professionals can use online platforms to showcase their work directly to potential employers.

5 The New Game of Presenting More Data

But how can applicants play a fundamentally new game of college applications in the age of GenAI? It has much to do with producing, accumulating and presenting more data.

5.1 How AI Tools Become the Change Maker

In the old days, screening a large volume of resumes can be time-consuming for colleges and employers, especially with repetitive information or difficulty parsing relevant skills. That's because humans must be doing it manually, which can quickly become tedious and boring.

The GenAI tools change the game completely — if the applicants and admission committees know how to play with it. Since the machine will do the reading and scanning for us, a larger dataset only helps AI algorithms learn from a wider range of examples, leading to more accurate pattern recognition and more robust models.

Imagine trying to learn the characteristics of different dog breeds with only a few pictures, compared to having hundreds or thousands. This is the same story

as my childhood game of creating a pencil image of coins: The more strokes we make on the paper, the more real the paper coin image will be.

Increased data volume allows AI to identify intricate and nuanced patterns that might be missed with a limited dataset. For example, analyzing financial transactions from millions of users might reveal subtle patterns indicative of fraudulent activity.

A larger dataset helps AI models become more generalizable. This means they can apply what they learn to new, unseen data points more effectively.

5.2 Caveats with Rich Data

It is an oversimplification to say that the more data we have, the better for AI to find patterns and stories. Not all data is good. Noises and biases in the real-world data can be amplified by AI models, leading to discriminatory or unfair outcomes.

If the data is too specific or the model is too complex, AI can become overly reliant on the training data and fail to generalize well to new situations.

Imagine training an image recognition system only on pictures of cats wearing hats. It might struggle to identify cats without hats.

But the problems listed above do not exist for college applicants with the ACOPA (Annotated Chronicle of Personal Achievement). Let's consider them one by one.

Since ACOPA is written mainly by students themselves and friends, family and classmates, and it focuses on personal achievements, students can reduce the externally generated noises and observational biases to a minimum so that they do not pose a big challenge.

Even better, personal achievement diaries do not need a specific "training data," as AI will simply summarize the data from the past. In other words, the

mission is not to generalize to new situations, so we need not worry about biased training data at all.

6 Reconsider Ivy Wydler

I can't stop thinking about Ivy Wydler, the girl with perfect ACT scores and yet rejected by her dream school of Duke and several other prestigious colleges. Her story tells us that we have passed the age of self-spoken, undebatable achievements that work for all colleges. Instead, college admission has been so diversified that nothing can be taken for granted, nothing is for sure and hardly anything will be equally appreciated by all colleges.

From a societal point of view, having diversity in college admission is a good thing. It matches with diversity of talents. But from an individual perspective, we all want to be appreciated by more colleges, just like most colleges want to see more applicants.

The job for colleges is easier, because after all, students apply for them, not the other way around. With the power of selective colleges increasing in recent years, how can student applicants increase their power? More specifically, what Ivy Wydler can do to make her a stronger, more wanted applicant, early admission or not?

Try ACOPA or Annotated Chronicle of Personal Achievements. The problem with a perfect ACT score is that it is still subject to different interpretations. Some colleges may believe standardized tests are biased toward upper middle class kids, and may hold that against Ivy.

Others may believe Ivy has had no social life, especially considering that she took the ACT the second year of her high school. Still others may just want to reject someone who stands out with academic achievement, so they can brag

about how selective their schools are to others. In that sense, Ivy could have been the casualty of the institutional pride.

Ivy's job is to preemptively eliminate these doubts, suspects and misunderstandings. Merely showing a perfect ACT score does little, or as I said above, may even do her harms. She must present her own interpretation of the score before anyone else generate theirs.

For example, Ivy could show how she volunteered to be an ACT tutor for classmates or anyone needing assistance. Better yet, how she contacted a book publisher to have a book publishing plan laid out on how to best prepare ACT test. These things would suddenly make her profile shining, as nobody would see her as a loner with no big heart and no friend.

Even without a book publishing plan, Ivy could show us a few tricks in test-taking, in preparing and in self-learning. People would then see her not as a winner completely by her naturally born gift, but as a talented self learner with good personal planning of her life. Natural gift may or may not be generalized or transferrable to other fields or topics, but learning skills will.

Finally, Ivy could also share that she doesn't consider a perfect ACT score a big deal. She would be happier if she could help more people overcome the fear associated with standardized tests and do better.

The takeaway is that test scores are just one isolated piece of the puzzle, students and their parents must think of how to connect it with other pieces to truly impress the admission committees.