

Chasing the college acceptance letter: Is it harder to get into college? At a glance

"Colleges, Awash in Applications, Turning Away Even Top Students"
(*Washington Post* April 7, 2006)

The headlines are stark. Anxiety levels are sky-high. Parents, students and educators whisper about the straight-A student who never received an acceptance letter. As a result, the college admissions game is starting earlier and earlier.

It may come as a shock, but the data shows that it is no more difficult for most students to get into college today than it was a decade ago. Beneath the headlines and the urban legends lies the real story: If students are well prepared in high school by earning the right credentials, they will get into a good college.

Unfortunately a silent achievement gap exists as low-income and minority students are much less likely than their higher-income and white peers to earn such credentials. It is more important than ever for low-income students to earn such credentials as some colleges report a preference to accept students who can pay full tuition over those who cannot.

- It was no more difficult for most students to get into college in 2004 than it was in 1992. The shrinking acceptance rates cited in so many news reports likely come from a higher number of applications per student (Carey 2007 and Hoxby 2009). However, the average applicant today has about the same chance of getting into a competitive college as an average applicant a decade ago.
- A top 2004 applicant (someone in the top 10 percent of his class) was actually slightly more likely to get admitted into a highly competitive college than a top 1992 applicant. A top 2004 applicant had a 68 percent chance of getting into a highly competitive college in 2004, compared to a 61 percent chance in 1992.
- Having the right credentials to get into college doesn't necessarily mean straight A's. It just means students should earn decent grades, take college-preparatory courses, and perform well on their college entrance exams. Students who fulfill the above credentials should be able to get into a competitive, four-year college, even if it isn't their dream college.
- Taking more rigorous courses, especially in math and science, gives an applicant a better chance of getting into a competitive college than does raising his or her GPA. For instance, lower-achieving students could increase their chances by over 10 percent if they simply took trigonometry instead of stopping math at algebra II. Higher college entrance exam scores also increase a student's chances.
- In general, all applicants had slightly higher grades in 2004 than in 1992, but the higher GPAs did not increase their chances of getting into college; more rigorous courses and better scores on college entrance exams did.

Not all the news was positive, however:

- Well-prepared minority applicants have just as good of a chance of getting into a competitive college as well-prepared white students. However, a much smaller percentage of minority applicants earn the necessary credentials.
- Well-prepared low-income applicants are less likely to get into a competitive college as well-prepared high-income applicants: 67 percent vs. 80 percent. Moreover, few low-income applicants earn the necessary credentials.

School boards can:

- Ensure that all students are provided a rigorous high school curriculum, especially higher level math and science courses like trigonometry and chemistry.
- Ensure that all students have access to high-quality teachers who can teach higher level courses effectively.
- Ensure that students have been given the proper math and science instruction in middle school so they are on track in high school to complete college preparatory courses, including trigonometry and chemistry.
- Provide resources to students who need help to do well in high-level courses and on their college entrance exams.
- Ensure that those who would be first-generation college applicants have access to knowledgeable guidance counselors. Counselors should encourage these students to consider college, make sure students are enrolled in the courses that will prepare them for college, and give students the support they need to navigate the application process.

School boards should be asking:

- Are all students entering high school prepared for college preparatory course work?
- Is our high school curriculum aligned with the expectations of our local colleges?
- Are school counselors properly advising all students to start taking the courses they need as soon as they enter high school so they can get into college?
- Are school counselors available to help all students with the college application process and with their financial aid options?

What this report is not about

The focus of this report is on the chances a student will get *accepted* into college. This is different from focusing on whether a student actually attends college or succeeds after arriving there.

Second, even though many of today's headlines bemoan how difficult it is for top applicants to get into elite colleges, this report looks at how difficult it is for the *average* applicant to get into a competitive¹, or somewhat selective college. As defined by Barron's, competitive colleges admit between 75 percent and 85 percent of applicants, most often accepting students ranked in the top 50 to 65 percent of their high school class.

In 2004, the average high school graduate expecting to go to college earned an overall Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.1, scored a 21 on the ACT college entrance exam, and passed math and science courses up through trigonometry² and chemistry, respectively.

Endnotes

¹Selective is a term synonymous with competitive in rating a colleges admissions' standards.

²Algebra III and Analytic Geometry are equivalents.

This report was written by Jim Hull, Center for Public Education Senior Policy Analyst. Special thanks to Dr. Jeff Allen at ACT, Inc. Statistical Research and Eric Taylor at the Center for Education Policy Research at the Harvard School of Education, for their insights and suggestions. Errors and opinions found within this guide, however, are solely those of the author.

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