

“Entering the Elite”

Turning down the heat on college admissions

by WILLIAM R. FITZSIMMONS

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AN APOCRYPHAL TALE about car-window decals epitomizes the frenzy surrounding college admissions in recent years. One high-school counselor tells another, “It’s not enough any more to advertise Susie’s admission to a prestigious college by displaying its decal on the car window. Today, they want the sticker to make it clear that she was admitted *early*.”

Into the fray comes *The Early Admissions Game*, reflecting five years of work by professor of public policy Christopher Avery and Ramsey professor of political economy Richard Zeckhauser (both of the Kennedy School of Government) and Andrew Fairbanks, a former admissions officer at Wesleyan. Grounded in statistical analysis, interviews, and historical research, their important contribution to the college-admissions process should reduce the general anxiety that pervades today’s transition to college and, in particular, help level the playing field for students who lack access to adequate college counseling. The book may also prompt needed reform of contemporary admissions practices.

The authors focus on highly selective colleges (the Ivies, “little Ivies,” et cetera) and the programs offering notification of admission by December 15 of the senior year (for those who apply by November 1), rather

than on the “regular” date, April 1. This procedure may sound routine, but almost no admissions rule is without controversy—and a resonant effect on society. Early admission comes in two forms: binding “Early Decision” programs that require admitted students to attend (and often ask parents and high-school counselors to sign commitments to that effect); and non-binding “Early Action” that allows admitted students to apply elsewhere and asks for a response by May 1,

the standard reply date. Most selective colleges use binding early decision. Until Yale announced a change in its policy early last fall (followed swiftly by Stanford), Harvard was the only early-action Ivy.

Pre-publication comment about *The Early Admissions Game* has centered on its “...clear and consistent finding: applying early provides an advantage in admissions decisions that is approximately equal to the effect of an increase of 100 points in SAT score.” On its face, this is valuable information for prospective applicants to many binding early-decision colleges. Indeed, some of these institutions—Penn most notably—forthrightly state that applying early is advantageous and that colleges benefit from having a sizable cohort of students who have a clear desire to attend them. Early-decision colleges have an incentive to admit more of their students

The Early Admissions Game: Joining the Elite, by Christopher Avery ’88, Andrew Fairbanks, M.P.P. ’95, and Richard Zeckhauser ’62, Jf ’68, Ph.D. ’69 (Harvard University Press, \$29.95).

Illustrations by Chris Pyle



by December 15 because that raises their “yield” on admitted students and, therefore, their ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*: a few institutions are admitting almost half their freshmen early. These colleges can lock in a large percentage of their incoming class at a nearly 100 percent yield because virtually all students admitted under binding early decision matriculate. (The tiny number not matriculating typically have irreconcilable financial-aid difficulties and are released from their commitments.) The “consumers”—students and their families—apparently like the favorable odds and the chance to reduce admissions anxiety, and so the number of “early” applicants has grown dramatically at most selective schools during the past decade—even though these students run the risk of rushing into premature college choices.

All this might seem primarily a private matter, except that early decision clearly has adverse effects on an important part of the college-eligible population, as Avery, Fairbanks, and Zeckhauser make manifest. First, their book repeatedly documents the benefit of having an outstanding high-school counselor. At a time when the counselee:counselor ratio approaches 1,000:1 in some schools, or counselors have disappeared entirely due to budget cuts, the authors’ goal—“to level the playing field for prospective applicants”—deserves acclaim for helping inner-city and rural students and those in other understaffed districts to pursue admission on a much more even footing.

In addition, the authors demonstrate why early-decision programs disadvantage lower-income applicants: “Early-decision applicants forfeit the option of negotiating financial aid. This barrier often leads financial-aid candidates to apply in regular decision, and puts them at a disadvantage relative to wealthier students who may gain a boost in admission chances by applying early.” All too often, of course, needy qualified students are precisely the ones who lack adequate high-school counseling.

HARVARD HAS NEVER OFFERED binding early decision because we want applicants to have their entire senior year not only to compare financial-aid offers, but to consider carefully whether Harvard

provides the best “fit” for them at this point in their lives. High-school seniors often change a good deal, and they constantly gather more information about the colleges to which they have applied. As they come to know themselves and various colleges better, they are more likely to make a wise choice. The roughly 15 percent of our early-action “admits” who choose to go elsewhere do so after much reflection, and we replace them with others who have had the full senior year to consider their college choice. Harvard’s graduation rate ranks among or at the top of the nation’s leading colleges; the freedom and flexibility that early action offers surely contribute to that.



So, a key question for high-school students and their families: does early action confer an advantage on applicants, as early decision appears to? From a strategic point of view, at least, early-action colleges do not have the same incentive to admit more students early, because students can still apply to other colleges during regular action and take the senior year to make their college choice. In addition, early-action colleges have no incentive to admit weaker candidates early and deny strong ones who apply later. Yet at Harvard, the number of students admitted early has risen to more than 1,100 of the nearly 2,100 who receive admission letters each year. In this academic year, early applications rose to more than 7,600 (more than triple the number who applied a

decade ago)—an increase the admissions staff attributes largely to the fact that early action is more attractive to top applicants simply because it is *not* binding. (The number of early and regular applications now totals close to 21,000 annually.)

The research conducted for *The Early Admissions Game* suggests that it is, indeed, easier for early applicants to get into early-action colleges, despite official statements to the contrary. But our own internal studies, as well as research at Yale reported in the book, suggest why the authors may have overestimated the effect.

Yale’s research reportedly demonstrated that students admitted early had higher grades and graduation rates than regular-admission students, presumably because “they may be stronger on hard-to-measure factors such as intellectual energy and motivation.” At Harvard, we used two carefully matched samples of early and regular applicants—students with exactly the same academic, extracurricular, and personal credentials (as assessed by admissions-staff ratings, which are based on multiple readings of each application *in its entirety*, including interviews, teacher and counselor reports, and whatever other information an applicant wished to include: portfolios, scientific research, music tapes). Ultimately, our study showed why even the most sophisticated statistical analysis, expertly executed by the three authors, cannot take the place of reading applications. The matched samples revealed that just as our early-action pool overall is considerably stronger than our regular pool, those admitted early were simply better candidates than those who were not. Although these findings apply only to Harvard, they are consistent with the positive differences suggested by the Yale study and with the claims of a number of the admissions officers surveyed by Avery, Fairbanks, and Zeckhauser.

The major problem with using regression analysis or other statistical techniques to assess the utility of applying early to Harvard in particular is that our decisions are not made automatically, but after lengthy deliberations by majority vote of a large and experienced admissions committee. The extremely fine gradations (not calibrated on our computer system) and subtle but important human dimensions considered by the committee

Syzygy

Poet and literary figure John Hall Wheelock '08 (1886-1978) was an editor at Charles Scribner's Sons for 46 years, working with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wolfe, Santayana, and many other of the Acclaimed. Wheelock dictated an autobiography, an account not only of his life, but of the New York publishing world in an ascendant period. In *The Last Romantic: A Poet among Publishers*, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli, with Judith S. Baughman (University of South Carolina Press, \$39.95), Wheelock recalls his attempt to gain membership in a Harvard literary society, the Signet.

THE SIGNET INITIATION I remember distinctly because it was quite overawing to a young man. We had expected—the two other candidates and myself who came in at the same time—that we probably would be subjected (so we were warned) to very drastic physical dangers and horrors of one sort or another. But on the contrary, we came out into this beautifully lighted room, and sitting before us were George Lyman Kittredge, the great scholar; William James, Professor of Psychology at Harvard; Josiah Royce, the philosopher; Hugo Münsterberg, the philosopher, I think also was there; and Charles Townsend Copeland, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric.

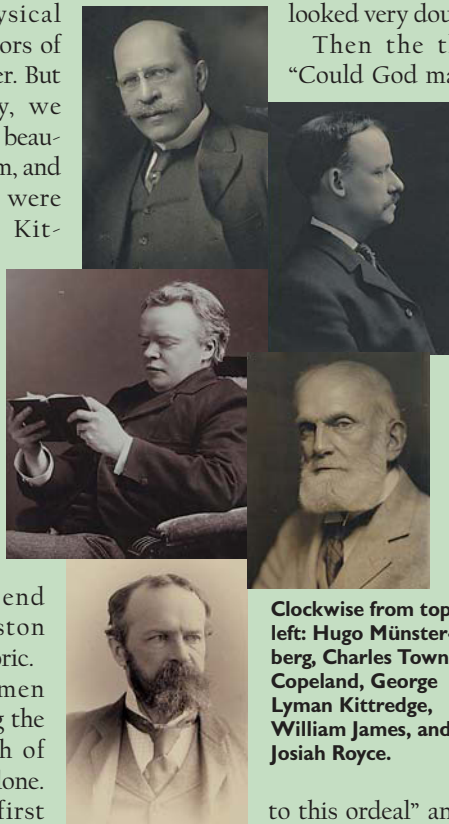
Then these men began questioning the candidates, each of whom came out alone. I remember the first question I was asked was by Kittredge, who said, "Spell 'syzygy.'" I couldn't spell it. He then said, "That's spelled S-Y-Z-Y-G-Y." He looked at the other inquisitors and said, "This candidate doesn't seem very promising to me."

Then one of the other professors, I can't remember which one, said to me, "Would you please let us know to which of Longfellow's sisters he addressed that beautiful line, 'Hail to thee,

blithe spirit, bird thou never wert.'" And I was confused, because I knew of course that this was from Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark," and it would seem rude to catch a professor in a mistake of that sort, so I had to claim that I wasn't familiar with that, either. Then they looked very doubtful.

Then the third question was: "Could God make rocks bigger than He could lift?" I'd never heard this question before. I have heard since that it's sometimes been used by boys to stump a Sunday school teacher. But there didn't seem to be any answer to that. So I just said I couldn't answer it.

All unanimously agreed—James, Münsterberg, Royce, Kittredge, Copeland, and whoever else was there: "This man is not fit for admission to the Signet. I'm sorry that we've subjected him to this ordeal" and so on. "Next candidate, please." And I retired in the most dreadful state of shame and annoyance. Then, when they'd all listened to and been subjected, I suppose, to the same humiliation, punch bowls were brought in, and I was welcomed with the rest of them as a new member. It was run by students, and these professors were men who had been in the Signet themselves as undergraduates, and it still goes on....



Clockwise from top left: Hugo Münsterberg, Charles Townsend Copeland, George Lyman Kittredge, William James, and Josiah Royce.

as it discusses each applicant cannot be captured by a regression equation. There are many superb choices for the 35-member admissions committee to make as it chooses slightly more than 2,000 from a pool of more than 20,000—and often little statistical difference among them: 55 percent of the pool average 1400 or higher on the SATs; 3,100 are valedictorians; and 3,000 have a perfect 800 on their math SATs.

For example, even though an admissions officer might initially rate as equal two promising mathematicians with seemingly identical objective credentials, faculty members who are asked to evaluate the cases look far beyond test scores and grades. To determine which applicants are truly unusual in mathematics (usually fewer than 10 each year), faculty members examine results of national and international math competitions, assess advanced work submitted by applicants, consult their teachers, and even talk to the applicants themselves. Similarly, although the authors try to simulate another aspect of an actual admissions process by constructing an extracurricular activities index, such a rough measure falls far short of capturing which few (also ordinarily under 10 or so) of the many hundreds of musicians applying each year with impressive credentials receive a virtuoso or near virtuoso rating from the faculty evaluation of submitted music tapes and (occasional) auditions. The same could be said of any other kind of extracurricular activity—or the critically important but even harder to quantify dimension of personal qualities and character.

Thus, although much of the book's general advice about applying early is valid, the effect of doing so may be less, perhaps considerably less, than the authors estimate. Students are well advised to explore college websites and publications to determine which colleges actually offer an advantage to those applying early—and, most important, which colleges provide them with a better match, regardless of "early" policies.

PAROCHIAL DIFFERENCES ASIDE, there is a wealth of information in this well-organized, clearly written book which will enable students to make better college choices. The authors amply document how confusing "early" programs can be for applicants: in a chapter comparing the

process to games of chance, they write, “The players (applicants) do not know the rules (that is, the standards for admission), and the casinos (college admissions offices) do not describe them, at least not fully or accurately.”

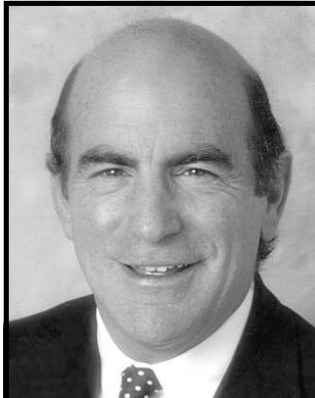
The book shows how the process actually works by following students from Choate Rosemary Hall, a private, primarily boarding, school in Connecticut that enrolls students from throughout the United States and abroad, and from Needham High School (in an affluent Boston suburb). The chapter title—“The Innocents Abroad: The Admissions Voyage”—fairly describes the seniors’ experiences, reflecting well the different perceptions of applying early at the two schools.

In chapter six the authors provide a wealth of data to support their contention that applying early is advantageous. Even if the results should be taken with a grain of salt, as noted previously, the analysis is conducted elegantly and explained with impressive clarity (including two wonderfully lucid introductory lessons on statistical significance and regression analysis). Following this analysis, the authors consider the “strategies” that are commonly used by colleges, counselors, and applicants—an extremely helpful chapter for everyone.

A chapter of “Advice to Applicants” separates *The Early Admissions Game* from other publications that offer insights into college admission. Relying on empirical evidence and a rational “probability” model devised by the authors for students to consider as they apply to college, whether for early or regular admission, the chapter allows students to assess the odds of their admission at the college of their choice.

One caveat: Two of the book’s strengths—its great reliance on statistics and its constant emphasis on strategy—can turn into liabilities if applicants take them too literally. The current cynicism about college admissions is not likely to abate if more students are encouraged to choose colleges strictly according to the numbers. Relying too much on a formulaic model can obscure the importance of making such a major life decision with the heart as well as the head—taking into account the “intangibles” as well as the balance sheet.

Similarly, the authors depict colleges as constantly preoccupied with issues of strategy, obsessing about improving their “numbers” for a higher U.S. News rating.



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Colleges do strive to get the best students they can, but there is also a great deal of concern about doing the right thing for the students they serve. Some early-decision colleges believe the binding option serves their students well by reducing anxiety with early admission to one of their top choices. Early-action colleges, including Harvard, could easily increase their yields by converting to early decision, but choose not to do so on principle. Yale acknowledges that its yield will likely decline, yet has chosen to move to early action from a binding program.

THESE CONTENDING PERSPECTIVES come into play in the last chapter, when *The Early Admissions Game* focuses on possible reforms. One modest proposal, to change the U.S. News rating system by using only the yield on *regular* admission applicants, is a good idea: it would measure the schools' drawing power for students not already committed under early decision and would reduce the incentive for early-decision col-

leges to admit so many applicants early. But after discussing other possibilities, the authors conclude that radical change in early admissions is unlikely.

Perhaps, but one of their other proposals—eliminating early decision entirely—has received much attention since James Fallows '70 published a seminal article, "The Early Decision Racket," in the September 2001 *Atlantic Monthly*. Early decision is undergoing scrutiny now as never before—not because it does not serve colleges and some of their applicants well, but because its underlying principles have been called into question. Already this past year Beloit, Fordham, Mary Washington College, Stanford, the University of North Carolina, and Yale have switched from early decision to early action, and others may follow. Reform may evolve from continued study of the effects of early programs on students' welfare.

One thing is clear: while the college-application timetable has changed significantly over the past decade, limits are in

sight. The majority of college applicants require financial aid and, along with the small number of truly outstanding applicants who have their choice of colleges, are unlikely to be stampeded into premature college choices (especially binding ones) without exploring all their options, financial and otherwise. And with Harvard's recent decision [see page 56] to return to its longstanding policy of stipulating that early-action applicants may *not* apply early elsewhere (along with identical new policies at Stanford and Yale), some of the early-admissions frenzy—in particular, indiscriminate multiple early applications—will be reduced. As students and their counselors react to the newly evolved landscape, they may well return to the fundamentals, focusing more on the right match for the student and less on "gaming" the system. ♣

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CHAPTER & VERSE

A correspondence corner for not-so-famous lost words

Arnold Schwab asks if someone can identify "Fougère," a reference in an 1895 review of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in which Cecily is described as "an ingenue who could give Fougère points."

Judith Stix seeks the origin of two phrases quoted by W.B. Yeats in notes to his poem "Mongan Laments the Change That Has Come upon Him and His Beloved": "the desire of man 'which is for the woman,' and 'the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man'...."

Reed Benet would like a source for: "On the plains of hesitation lie the bleached bones of countless millions, who, at the dawn of victory, laid down to rest—and resting, died."

James Gilbert hopes to locate a poem about the Nativity in which, he paraphrases, the innkeeper shouts that "some woman just had a baby in the stable."

"Dry clashed his harness" (March-April). Erik Gray led in identifying this

reference from Alfred Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* (line 186). The passage reappears in the later *The Passing of Arthur* (line 354), from *Idylls of the King*.

"beauty in the gentle breeze" (March-April). Don Share was first to identify the query as a misquotation of the opening line of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*: "Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze."

"American pilot" (March-April). Edward Tabor first identified "England to America," by Margaret Prescott Montague. Published in the September 1918 *Atlantic Monthly*, it won the 1919 O. Henry Award.

"Where the snowflakes fall thickest" (March-April). William Hungate was first to identify "The Boys," written by Oliver Wendell Holmes, A.B. 1829, M.D. 1836, for his thirtieth College reunion. Raymond Reister found both this poem and the story cited above in his old high-school English textbook, *Adventures in American Literature* (revised edition, 1944).

"confused" (March-April). Winifred Maher suggested as a possibility Enrico Fermi's statement "Before I came here I was confused about this subject. Having listened to your lecture I am still confused. But on a higher level"—reprinted in Rob Kaplan's *Science Says* (2001), which cited Alan L. Mackay's *A Dictionary of Scientific Quotations* (1991).

"polished my good shoes" (March-April). James Harvey and Kit Wallingford were the first of more than 50 readers to recognize "Those Winter Sundays," from *Angle of Ascent* (1962), by Robert Hayden, this country's first African-American poet laureate. Jay Banks noted that the poem—which ends, "What did I know, what did I know/of love's austere and lonely offices?"—is number 266 in William Harmon's 1992 compilation of the most anthologized poetry in English, *The Top 500 Poems*.

Send inquiries and answers to "Chapter and Verse," Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138.