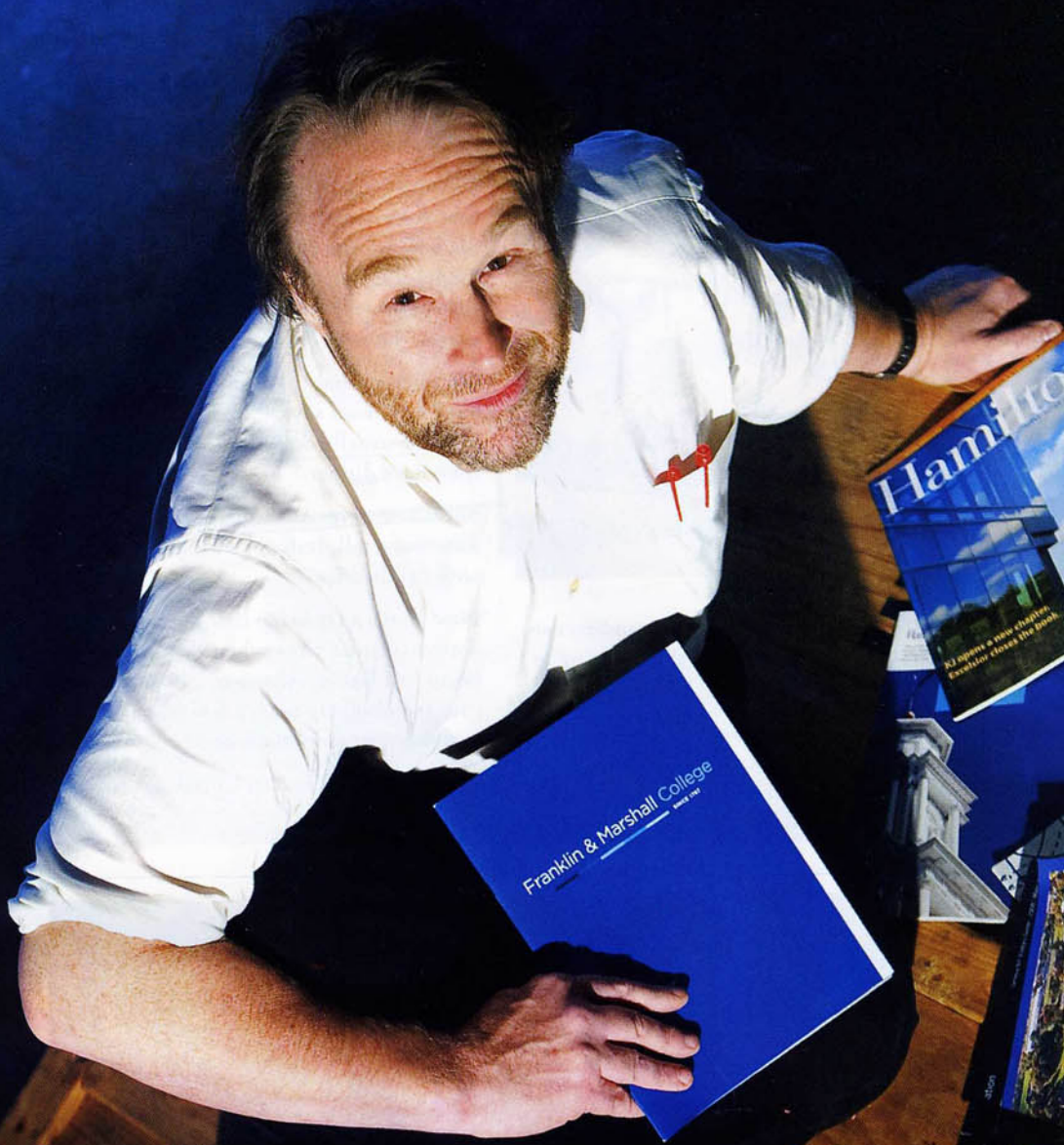


With one child in college and a second on the way, author Dickinson has spent years fending off overtures from the college admissions 'industrial complex.'



College Admissions Shell Game

A parent's perspective on how non-elite colleges shamelessly pander to win the admissions game

By DUO DICKINSON

Because I have a sophomore in college and a senior in high school, the American College Admissions Industrial Complex has been commanding my attention with a cynical exuberance that must be experienced to be believed. Getting into a non-elite college has become a process in which New Age pandering has replaced Old School pretense — where harvesting applicant numbers is as important as locking in the \$50,000-a-year price of admission for most any private institution.

Unless your child is among the top five percent of high school academics, musicians, artists or athletes who can negotiate their terms of college admittance, he or she is bombarded with a marketing effort by the private collegiate underclass that turns the traditional image of higher education on its head. Those vanilla students who have no compelling personal saga (inner-city childhood, first in the family ever to attend college, raised by wolves) and have not performed at a demonstrably excellent level (grades and standardized tests in the top ten percent) are told by the lower-tier private liberal arts colleges competing to admit them that higher education is an “excellent adventure.” The marketing of that “adventure” can easily and often does

descend into shallow and cynical hype.

The admissions mating ritual has evolved from the previous generation’s happenstance encounter between disinterested admissions officers, out-of-it parents and bewildered students to desperate applicant families trying to game the system to get a B student into an A school — and admissions folk equally desperate to get their raw admissions and “yield” numbers up.

The process is now open, above-board, transparent — and completely disingenuous. Whereas state schools can use lower costs to drive up applications and acceptance rates, especially in tough economic times, the heat is on the non-Ivy-level private schools to “put meat in the seats” to stay afloat. These institutions were part of my children’s application portfolio, and their common approach is disturbingly consistent.

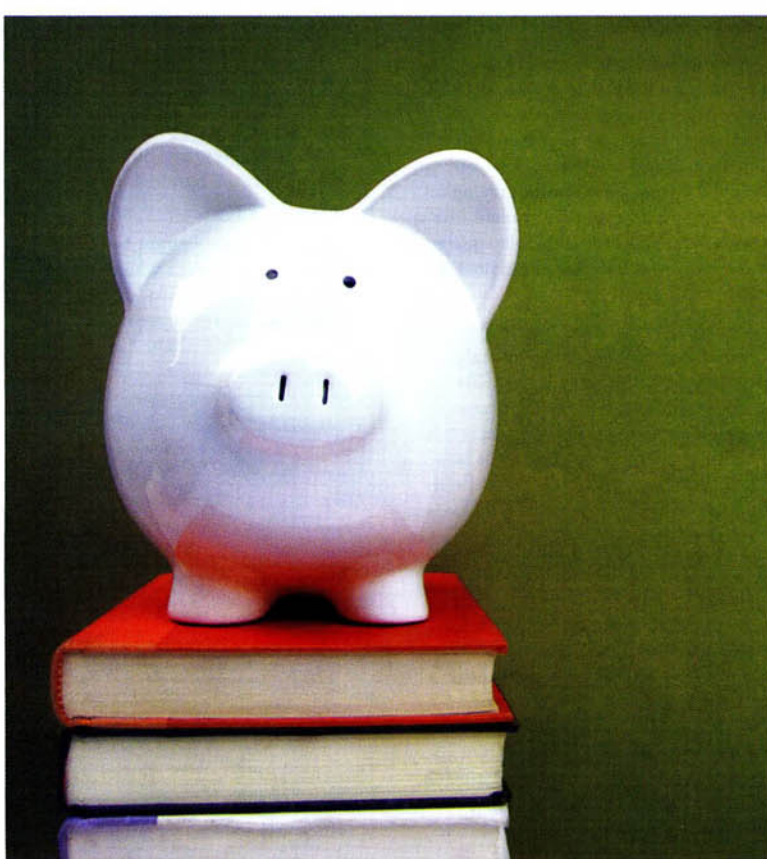
Admissions advisers, abetted by the zeitgeist of books like *Colleges That Change Lives* and *The Hidden Ivies*, tell college applicants that all schools are more or less equally desirable — you just have to find the one that “fits” you best. This is a classic New Age argument of relativistic rationalizing. The argument is that the “good” schools are not really better

— they’re just more famous, beneficiaries of unmerited positive regard of cultural bias toward entrenched elites. So what if you studied little, partied lots or that your greatest high-school accomplishment was reaching level 59 of *Space Raider Star Troopers* — there are hundreds of schools just perfect for you!

This attitude is tantamount to a deep-neck massage to parents who desperately want to show those snooty elite schools that they should want your spawn, even with that C in French. The “It’s all good” paradigm also serves the purposes of admissions officers of the second-tier (or lower) schools that are happy to receive as many unqualified applications as they can get e-mailed into their inbox — deep-sixing the lame at warp speed, as any application (qualified or otherwise) accrues to the greater hype of their selectivity ranking.

The aggressive effort by the omnivorous non-elite/not-cheap private colleges to distract applicants from the actual consequences of their class standing starts with “hip” brochures and edgy Web sites, that spout words like “excellence,” “risk,” and “community” between testimonials by hip and happy students.

If sufficiently seduced by guidance



counselor recommendations and propaganda, you then “must” visit perfectly outfitted admissions offices offering warm chocolate chip cookies and crisp pretzels. In recent years, stock market bubble-engorged endowments allowed the architecture and landscapes of small college campuses to be set-designed and art-directed enough to astonish returning alumni. These makeovers focus on the prime directive of college admissions: To get as many kids as possible to apply, thus making the college’s “selectivity” rating higher. This is done by making the campus warm and fuzzy with things the kids care about.

Since impulse purchases are often driven by peripherals (like the color of the car in the showroom) the most visible efforts of the admissions office to get applications in the inbox are not geared to revealing academic excellence. In visiting a score of campuses over the last 30 months I’ve yet to see a dining hall that offered fewer than three options of design-your-own entrées (stir fry, omelette, sandwich, sushi, etc.) Franklin & Marshall’s main dining hall has seven separate empowering stations of personal food expression. Once

the thrill of the Extreme Food Court approach to dorm fare becomes old news, there is always (always) breakfast cereal present and mac-and-cheese at every non-breakfast meal — soft, salty and sweet, a low-impact diet for the gastronomically risk averse.

There are study/social areas in virtually every new academic building (instead of a buzz-killing segregation of building use into separated studying and social functions). Dorm rooms open for inspection by prospective students (occupied by students who are paid to keep them neat) are fully propped — one at Muhlenberg was right out of a Crate & Barrel catalogue. Every campus is WiFi-wired and there are concerts, comedians, plays and other circuses in celebrated abundance. Hamilton’s remote upstate New York campus brings in acts more often playing small cities.



Beyond these polished physical manifestations of the on-site marketing machine, two rituals take place at virtually every college in America. One is the “info

session,” during which an admissions drone, in a glib, hip and provocative presentation, tells you what makes their school “special.” Inevitably, it comes down to the pitch that “You can do anything you want to here” and “Professors take a personal interest in every student” and “This school wants the entire academic experience to enrich your life.” All promise that study abroad can be had at the drop of a hat (neglecting the fact that it also requires thousands of dollars of funding by your parents), and that their school is “uniquely” committed to one-on-one student-led research projects (it’s hard to imagine that every school is “unique”).

Then there is the tour, an experience that *Saturday Night Live* could easily parody with a screeching Rachel Dratch walking backwards, talking a mile a minute, waving arms, often saying things that are virtually incoherent, Tourettes-ing the idioms of the potential students she is leading (“like,” “kinda,” “really, really” and of course “awesome”).

Another revealed truth about these ritualistic kabuki dances of mutual assured seduction and dueling hype (one side promoting the school, the other the applicant), is that these tours and the info sessions are completely redundant. Virtually everything that is said in one is said in the other, and there is seldom an insight available that is not scripted.

You come to realize that the bottom line is that these schools are trying to make their own institution financially secure by creating a market that will continually yield more and more applicants and ultimately, out of that group yield enough “stakeholders” to pony up the \$200,000 price tag for a four-year sojourn.

Into this emotionally charged marketplace the rules of capitalism are bizarrely distorted. Despite having 50- to 80-percent acceptance rates because the number of applicants are smaller and the majority of accepted candidates go elsewhere, the private non-elite schools charge about the same as the Superstars. Even though the elites accept just seven to ten percent of their much larger applicant pools (because the vast majority of those accepted opt to matriculate), they do not charge more than their less-desirable counterparts.

The non-elite schools need to charge as much or more as the elite institutions to fund their hype machine. The goal for these non-elite private colleges is full enrollment at the highest price tag the

market will bear. The need to cover their nut of consumer-friendly/application-milking costs means that these colleges have a fill-the-class priority. With that as the priority, that C in French can become a mulligan — no harm, no foul.

Since the trick for the non-elites is to get the applications in, and ultimately enough applicants paying the freight to keep the machine going, admissions offices have every motivation to distort inconvenient truths about their institutions.

Examples of intentional vagary abound if you are able to maintain a dispassionate perspective (not exactly easy when it’s your kid’s future on the line). Union College received a dreaded “Top 15 Party School” ranking and responded by trying to reassure applicants (and their parents) that it was the result of the actions “three years ago by about 150 seniors.” Inner-city schools like Hartford’s Trinity and Clark (in Worcester, Mass.) ignore any crime statistics in their presentation. Wisconsin’s Lawrence University is rated “more selective” in rankings, but once the school’s music conservatory’s admission numbers are removed from the stats, a little bit of sixth-grade math reveals that eight out of ten applicants are admitted to the non-selective portion of the school — and also that eight out of ten of those admitted elect to go to school elsewhere.

The bottom line is simply this: When we think about outcomes instead of process, things get pretty harsh. When the “most selective” universities in America (Yale, Harvard, etc.) simply drop the requirement for interviews, and similarly when many of the “less selective” schools drop the requirement for standardized testing results, something is being said. Essentially, 90 percent of colleges and universities are desperate to get the number of applicants up to make themselves seem even more desirable, and the elite schools are anxious to find objective standards to separate those with the greatest intellectual potential to enrich their academic environment from those who don’t have it.

Sadly, most parents and their children are hopeful that being president of the Biodiversity Club in high school is the same as getting an A in AP Biology. It is not. Despite the overwhelming hype machine of the invigorated academic underclass, all schools want students who have taken honors courses and performed well in them. If your child didn’t do that, he or she may be a great person, but odds are they ain’t going to Yale. ❖