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## GREAT EXPECTATIONS: How Boarding Schools Should Respond To Concerns About College Placement

*By James W. Wickenden*

For more than 15 years, I've been consulting with independent schools, including many of the nation's boarding schools. For nearly all of that time, I've been hearing from boarding school Heads that trustees and parents are increasingly concerned about college placement lists that have become steadily less impressive, as gauged by the number of students admitted to the most selective colleges.

Curiously, even though this phenomenon appears to be nearly universal within the boarding school world, the reaction of the trustees and parents at each school seems to be, "What is this school doing wrong and how can we fix it?"

My short answers, drawn from my dual perspectives as an independent school consultant and a former Dean of Admission at Princeton University, are these:

- Your school might not be doing anything wrong, and
- You probably can't "fix it," if by that you mean restoring the college placement record of days gone by, when the most selective colleges routinely admitted a high percentage of your graduating class.

This is not to say that I believe boarding schools can or should ignore this changing landscape. If not managed correctly, the unmet expectations of the various constituencies, particularly current and prospective parents, may erode what is already a small market.

Furthermore, this issue is becoming an increasingly public one, as evidenced by the recent front-page article in *The Wall Street Journal* (January 23, 2001) entitled "Prep Schools Buff Images to Boost College Admissions." Although not pleasant reading for anyone who cares about the reputation of independent schools, the article is a must-read for trustees and administrators.

While most independent secondary schools have been affected to some extent by the changing college admissions picture, boarding schools have been hardest hit precisely because they once benefited most from their close ties with the Ivy League. In this article, I'd like to offer my thoughts about the roots of this problem and to explain why I think boarding schools should shift their focus away from solving an unsolvable problem and toward responding in ways that would be more productive for students and schools alike.

## College Admissions: A Historical Perspective

**S**TATED simply, the problem facing boarding schools is a mathematical one.

Fifty years ago, only 2,500 candidates submitted their papers to Princeton. Today, 14,000 apply. Even taking into account the larger Princeton classes today, it is four times more difficult to gain admission to Princeton today than was the case 50 years ago.

And Princeton is not alone. All of the Ivy League institutions – as well as Stanford, MIT, Duke, Georgetown, Rice, the University of Chicago, Pomona, “The Little Three” and others – have experienced similar increases in their respective applicant pools.

There are at least five reasons for this remarkable boom in competition, *all of which are outside the control of the boarding school world*:

1. The introduction and widespread acceptance of the SATs as a measure of students’ preparedness.
2. The proliferation of excellent college-preparatory day schools, public and private.
3. The increased mobility of society, coupled with the declining costs of travel.

4. The increased availability of financial aid.
5. The high premium placed on diversity as an important consideration in building a student body.

I’ll discuss each briefly.

First, the SATs. Fifty or sixty years ago, each of the selective colleges specified its own admissions requirements and offered its own admissions exams. If a secondary school prepared students for those exams – which boarding schools did very well – the students who underwent that preparation usually would fare well in the admissions process. For example, relatively few secondary schools taught Latin and Greek, and students who did not attend those schools could not qualify for admissions to colleges that required preparation in those languages.

Shortly after World War II, the SATs became the coin of the realm, eventually replacing all of the special examinations. Because the SATs did not require special preparation, more students could take them – and did.

With the rise of the SATs as a standard measurement tool came the opportunity for many more schools to pursue the mission of preparing students for the nation’s most selective colleges. Excellent day schools are now available

to families across the country, providing an attractive alternative to boarding schools for the top students while also substantially increasing the number of schools serving as steady feeders to the nation's top colleges. Both independent schools and public schools in affluent areas have flourished as a result.

With respect to mobility, bear with me while I state the obvious. Fifty years ago, flying across the country was a big deal. And because it was expensive, the vast majority of students applied to colleges close to home. Today, with the deregulation of the airline industry and with the opportunity to shop around for reduced fares, young adults with impressive academic records can seriously consider educational options at some distance from their home. For example, when I was the Dean of Admission at Princeton – and that was almost 20 years ago – California sent more students to Princeton University than all of the other states, except for New York and New Jersey.

Furthermore, during the five years I served as Dean, the number of international students who applied and were admitted increased incrementally each year. I suspect that the number of Californians and international students at all of the most selective colleges has continued to rise.

The availability of financial aid has also contributed to the increase of those applying to the most selective colleges. I am not implying that financial aid was not available 50 years ago. I am, however, stating that the endowments of these selective colleges have grown so

significantly that vast amounts of moneys are now available for scholarship purposes. In fact, in late January of 2001, Princeton University announced that those qualifying for financial aid would no longer be required to take out loans. Financial aid packages will now consist of just scholarship and part-time work. So generous are some of these awards that talented students from very modest backgrounds often discover that it is cheaper for them to attend a highly selective college than their own state university.

The final – and perhaps most dramatic – change in the college admissions scene has been the emergence of the ethos that a diverse student body is a prerequisite to creating a vibrant learning community that reflects the face of America and the world.

While boarding schools of the past had many great attributes, a diverse student body was not among them. And even though boarding schools have themselves become much less homogeneous over the past several decades, the colleges' enthusiastic pursuit of diversity mandates that their student bodies be drawn from a much broader range of feeder schools.

None of these five reasons will come as news to anyone who has been paying attention to our changing world. None of these five changes can be fairly "blamed" on boarding schools. Why, then, do so many parents and trustees persist in their insistence that schools do something to reverse the trend of declining acceptance rates at top schools?

I would argue that this is fundamentally a losing battle, and that boarding schools should accept this reality gracefully and begin adapting aggressively.

But just for argument's sake, let's look at what boarding schools could do if they were determined to "improve" their placement list at all costs.

### What It Would Take

If I were hired to consult with a new boarding school unabashedly committed to a mission of maximizing the percentage of graduates admitted to highly selective colleges, these are the strategies I would recommend:

1. Begin with your own admissions process. Fill your incoming class with (and give attractive financial aid packages if necessary to) the following categories of students, all of whom will later have an edge in the college admissions sweepstakes:
  - Excellent standardized test takers
  - Stellar student athletes, preferably in non-mainstream sports that are valued at top-tier colleges (lacrosse, golf, squash, etc.)
  - High-performing students from disadvantaged backgrounds
  - The children of graduates of the Ivy League and other premier colleges, especially those belonging to families of great wealth with a reputation for philanthropy
2. Do not take "risks" on bright underachievers, students with learning differences, or otherwise ordinary good kids who offer no future admissions "hook."
3. Once you have assembled this student body of future favored applicants in the college admissions process, design your educational programs and policies with the end result in mind:
  - Offer as many honors and AP courses as you can cram into the schedule
  - Practice grade inflation, and refuse to provide colleges with class rank or other indicators of relative performance
  - Integrate standardized test preparation throughout the curriculum in core subject areas; teach only to the tests
  - Ensure that all of your students have the opportunity to pursue those unique and dramatic experiences that provide excellent material for the college essay.

4. Finally, invest heavily in your college counseling operation. Begin monitoring students' performance in and outside of the classroom early in their secondary school careers to ensure that they are building an impressive portfolio right from the start. Train your faculty members to write heartstring-tugging letters of recommendation. Wine and dine admissions officers at your target colleges.

If this mythical new boarding school were to follow my advice, it might (for a time at least) enjoy an edge in the college placement game. But at what cost?

### What I Really Recommend

**O**F course, I'm enough of an idealist to believe that most boarding schools still aspire to a far nobler mission than the one described above. I know of none whose stated mission is as narrowly focused or as hollow. And I know, too, that while it is easy to mock the preoccupation of parents with college admission outcomes, feelings on this subject run strong and deep. So how can boarding schools continue to pursue their stated mission while also being responsive to the unstated one?

I think boarding schools should take *reasonable* steps to position their students well for college placement. What is reasonable?

First, the college counseling office should be professionally run and appropriately funded. The Director of College Counseling should be a 12-month

employee so that he or she can spend the summer months nurturing relationships within the admission offices of the colleges at which you want your students to be successful.

Next, the college counseling office should use technology effectively to track trends and manage paperwork. In addition, the office should communicate regularly and effectively with students and parents, beginning well before the college choice looms. Everyone at the school who plays a role in college placement – including the faculty members who write recommendations and work with students on essay writing – should receive training.

While many faculty members will balk at this suggestion, I believe that most schools could and should do more to prepare students for the battery of standardized tests that highly selective colleges require.

Despite the fact that many college admissions officers deny it, I continue to maintain that SAT scores are the single best predictor of college admissions. Students who do not perform at the highest levels on this test enter the process at a significant disadvantage.

Schools should do what they can to ensure that all students develop the skills and knowledge measured by this test: vocabulary, reading comprehension, basic writing skills, algebra and geometry. And while many fine teachers fiercely resist the notion of “teaching to the test,” I think those teaching AP courses should be committed to preparing students to do well on the AP exam. I also think teachers should be able to prepare students to post solid scores on the SAT II subject exams while also designing courses that

engage and excite students. Furthermore, students who tend to under-perform on these tests relative to their ability should be identified early and encouraged to work on their test-taking skills.

Next, I believe that boarding schools should do more to differentiate their programs – and thus, their students – from those of excellent public and independent day schools. Each boarding school should strive to offer at least one signature experience or requirement that makes its students readily distinguishable from those of other schools.

Because the most obvious difference between your program and those of day schools is the residential life component, I would argue that boarding schools should be more creative in thinking about the ways in which the residential life program could be used to add value to the educational experience of your students.

### **Where Schools Have Failed**

**W**HILE I have made the case throughout this paper that boarding schools should not be blamed for the change in their college placement records, I do believe that many schools have failed in one important respect.

Instead of acknowledging this sea change in higher education and adapting to it, far too many boarding schools have chosen instead to obscure rather than clarify the new reality for prospective parents.

For example, as *The Wall Street Journal* article notes, schools are now publishing college placement lists that, while technically accurate, are often misleading. Listing all of the schools where students were accepted rather than where they eventually matriculated

makes it appear that many students were successful in breaking into the top tier of schools; in fact, though, one or two students may account for a large number of the Ivy League admits. Similarly, schools that are now publishing cumulative lists that date back many years may present a false impression of the performance of a more recent typical class.

In the course of my consulting work, I often have the opportunity to review both the admissions materials and the actual college placement lists of schools. Only rarely do the admissions materials accurately reflect the actual range of colleges attended by graduates.

I would argue that by shading reality in this way, boarding schools in fact encourage the unreasonable expectations that they later complain about. To put it somewhat harshly, I believe that the strategy of implying a more impressive college placement record than actually exists is a form of “bait and switch” advertising – luring families with an appealing pitch and then later attempting to adjust their expectations downward.

### **Managing Expectations**

**I** understand that boarding schools have pursued this strategy in large part because of the somewhat precarious marketplace in which they find themselves. With an already limited pool of families interested in boarding schools, it is understandable that admissions offices would be loath to admit that one of their key past competitive advantages has been eroded by circumstances beyond their control.

Reputation – good or bad – does lag reality when it comes to schools. But, as *The Wall Street Journal* article demonstrates, the changing college admissions picture is increasingly a non-secret. If prospective parents are not already saying to you, “Why should I send my child away from home when you can’t promise me an advantage in the college admissions process?” they soon will be. Are you prepared to answer this question?

My own customer service philosophy is that it is better to under-promise and over-deliver than to over-promise and under-deliver. In short, boarding schools should begin practicing truth in advertising. To put it another way, the time has come to stop raising expectations and to begin managing them.

Why not publish a college placement summary that accurately identifies the *range* of colleges that your students typically attend? It might read something like this: *“Our students who graduate in the top XX percent of their class typically go on to matriculate at the most selective colleges in the nation, including . . . Students who graduate in the middle third of the class are eagerly sought out by a large group of very selective colleges and universities. Virtually all students who successfully complete our program matriculate in well-respected, selective colleges and universities.”*

In fact, parents participating in your admissions process already have one early indicator of their child’s likely college trajectory: the predicted SAT scores that are included in the child’s SSAT Score Report. Why not make this information a part of the marketing process? Schools that can claim a record of success in

helping students to outperform this prediction could make a compelling case for the benefits of their program.

If you use alumni success stories in your admissions materials, include some profiles of graduates who were not at the top of their class and who did not attend the most selective institutions.

Talk about the increasingly competitive college admissions picture and tell prospective families what you will do to prepare students – not so much for success in college admissions as for success in college and beyond. Acknowledge that this success is not a guaranteed service you provide but a shared responsibility of school and student. *“If your child works hard here, meets our high expectations, and takes full advantage of the exceptional opportunities we offer, he or she will be well educated and well positioned for a successful college career and a fulfilling adult life.”*

To bolster that claim, schools could provide statistical information about the performance of their graduates at the colleges they attend: the success of the “match” (as evidenced by completion rates, transfer data and performance), and the rate at which they pursue graduate degrees. If you do this, make certain that you compare the data from your school to national statistics.

Begin early the process of educating parents and students about the numerous lesser-known but nonetheless excellent colleges and universities that welcome your school’s graduates.



Finally, be realistic about the type of student who is most likely to seek out and benefit from the educational program you offer. Students who score at the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile on the SSAT and earn good grades in school are unlikely to apply to a boarding school. Granted there are exceptions to that generalization, but there are only a handful of boarding schools in the country whose applicants regularly score at or above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile on the SSAT.

Define the kind of student who is most likely to apply and the kind of student you are best qualified to serve, and then go after them aggressively. For most boarding schools, that target market probably comprises youngsters who score between the 60<sup>th</sup> and the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile on the SSAT. You want to recruit youngsters who have ability but who need the attention of the faculty to perform well.

You may also want to pursue youngsters who have a passion for some activity – sports, drama, debate, etc. – but who might not be quite good enough to perform that activity in their current school, particularly if it is a large public school. You want to pursue youngsters whose interests coincide with the place-bound experiences offered at your school.

You want to pursue youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds who have strengths or talents that will enable them to overcome the cultural and economic hurdles they will encounter at the school. And, of course, you want to pursue youngsters who already have connections to your school family.

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## A Final Word to Boards

**W**HILE I began this article by suggesting that Boards should not be looking within their own schools to assign blame for the changing college admissions picture, I do not mean to imply that Boards should be unconcerned about the issue. Quite the contrary.

I would argue, in fact, that it is the Board – not the college counseling, admissions, or even the Head's office – that primarily owns this issue. I say that because I believe the essence of this challenge is strategic rather than operational. At its heart, it is a fundamental question of mission, not a matter of tweaking a list.

The diminished college placement advantage is only the latest in a series of challenges that boarding schools have confronted and – to a degree that has surprised many naysayers – overcome in the past few decades. Boarding schools have responded to other threats to their relevance through coeducation, financial aid, and a considerable broadening of their target markets. Many have raised truly impressive sums of money, built excellent new facilities, strengthened their programs, and reversed enrollment declines.

To meet this latest challenge, Boards need once again to lead their schools in the strategic process of:

- clarifying the mission
- ensuring that it is distinctive and meaningful
- articulating it clearly and proudly, and
- ensuring that the school's programs and policies are in alignment with the mission and successful in carrying it out.