GATEKEEPERS AND ACCESS AGENTS: HOW ADMISSIONS OFFICERS UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLES IN SHAPING COLLEGE ACCESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY MARKET FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

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2021
ABSTRACT

Many scholars (Cox, 2016; Harklau & McClanahan, 2012; Niemann & Maruyama, 2005; Solórzano, 2005) have explored the causes of opportunity gaps in higher education. Those studies have looked at the various impediments to accessing higher education that have led to the persistence of gaps in college attendance rates, but few have specifically explored the complex relationship between college admissions officers and institutional admissions policies. This study will contribute to literature related to higher education access by examining the roles of admissions officers and adding their perspectives to a body of work where their voices have been largely absent. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) with particular emphasis on its application in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate Iv, 1995; Taylor, 2009), this study critically examines how admissions officers understand their roles in shaping pathways to higher education. Each of the three manuscripts that follow are drawn from the qualitative research I conducted with admissions officers at public colleges in New England over the course of eighteen months. Through textual analysis of college websites, surveys, and semi-structured interviews with 21 different admissions officers, I sought to understand how college admissions officers made sense of their role in shaping access to higher education and the implications this work has on issues of equity.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document would not exist without the patience and generosity of Lesley Bogad. She assumed the role as major professor at a time when I was struggling most and shepherded this project through seemingly endless ups and downs. I never made things easy for her and I will forever be grateful for her patience, kindness, and her unrivaled ability to know exactly what a student needs when they need it. I have been a student for nearly 40 years and have had several transformative experiences with teachers. Dr. Bogad is the best teacher I have ever learned with. I also would like to thank her son Micah for generously sharing his mom with me for far longer than he should have had to.

Annemarie Vaccaro, Leslie Schuster, and Kathy Peno were absolutely essential parts of my team. They are all accomplished scholars who generously shared their expertise throughout this process. I was especially grateful to them for knowing exactly when to administer tough love and when to send incredibly well-timed texts of encouragement. Most importantly, they stood with me when I struggled and cheered me on when things were going well. I would not have made it without them.

Janet Johnson and Julie Horwitz played a critical role in helping me view myself as a scholar and researcher. They challenged me to grow as a student and helped me develop the confidence and skills that I needed to complete this study. I would also like to thank two professors who helped shape who I am as a student and a person. I would never have even begun this work without having previously studied with Robert Cvornyek and Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban. They challenged me to think differently about the
world and my role in it. They laid the foundation for this study well before I knew anything about college admissions.

Lastly, I am tremendously appreciative of the support that I received from my family. My wife and daughters sacrificed a great deal as I worked on this study but never made me feel as though I was a burden. My parents have always given me more than I deserved and that continued throughout the long journey to complete this study.
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Introduction

Postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important as more career fields require some level of education after high school. A study from the Georgetown Center for Public Policy found that job growth during the recent economic recovery disproportionately benefited individuals with college degrees (Carnevale et al., 2016). According to the report, jobs created during the 2015 economic recovery went to those with bachelor’s degrees at a rate of 105:1 over those with only a high school diploma. This makes addressing the persistent opportunity gaps that have historically plagued US higher education one of the most important social and economic priorities of the 21st century (Dorn, 2017; Guinier, 2015).

Many scholars (Cox, 2016; Harklau & McClanahan, 2012; Niemann & Maruyama, 2005; Solórzano, 2005) have conducted research exploring the causes of opportunity gaps in higher education. These studies have highlighted the various impediments to accessing higher education that have led to the persistence of gaps in college attendance rates, but few have specifically explored the complex relationship between college admissions officers and institutional admissions policies. This study will contribute to literature related to higher education access by examining the roles of admissions officers and adding their perspectives to a body of work where their voices have been largely absent. This study critically examines how admissions officers understand their roles in shaping pathways to higher education and is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) with particular emphasis on its application in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Taylor, 2009). As a theoretical tool, Critical Race Theory holds that racism is deeply entrenched in all segments of American society and works in
tandem with other forms of discrimination and subordination to preserve systems of privilege that advantage straight, white males (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Yosso et al., 2009). The intersection of racism and other forms of bias has significantly impacted access to higher education in the United States and CRT provides a broad, multidisciplinary theoretical frame of reference through which to explore the experiences of admissions officers.

As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue, it is the depth of this entrenchment that obscures the extent to which racial hierarchies determine the distribution of power and opportunity in the US (Delgado et al., 2017). In the college admissions process specifically, it is notions of “meritocracy” -- a “colorblind” concept that broadly informs how admissions officers evaluate “college readiness” -- that affirms the framing of historically marginalized populations as deficient relative to whites and thus, not deserving of the same opportunities in higher education (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Yosso, 2005). This conditioned “colorblindness” ensures that only the most egregious cases of racial bias are addressed because the most common and most damaging are unseen (Harris, 1993; Wildman, 1996). In the context of college admissions, policies that explicitly exclude populations of students have been replaced by ones that achieve similar ends but elude critique because they are carefully written using race-neutral language (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Guinier, 2015). And yet, studies have shown that many admissions policies and practices are explicitly biased and disproportionately exclude poor students and students of color in the college admissions process (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Zwick & Himelfarb, 2011).
CRT has activist roots and seeks to expose and undermine dominant ideologies that preserve systems of privilege in the United States (Solorzano et al., 2000; Wildman, 1996; Yosso, 2005). Born in response to the slow pace of legislation to combat inequality (racism, gender bias, power gaps, etc.), Critical Race Theory provides a theoretical foundation to individuals seeking to challenge and upend systems that marginalize students of color (Taylor, 2009). At the heart of this activism is a commitment to remedying historical injustices, in part, by disrupting narratives designed to obscure them. Wildman (2012) wrote, “Privilege is invisible only until looked for, but silence in the face of privilege sustains its invisibility” (pg. 107). Whites have historically enjoyed the power to shape and sustain their privileged place in higher education by adapting policies to serve their interests. Critical Race Theory provides a framework for exposing, undermining, and ultimately reshaping pathways to opportunity in the United States and is thus, particularly relevant to this study.

It is exactly this commitment to social justice and the pursuit of systemic change in the field of college admissions that motivated me to pursue this research. Although I did not always acknowledge it, I have always been the beneficiary of a network of systems that were designed to serve and protect my interests. When I was completing my own college applications, I was confident that all the other candidates in the applicant pool enjoyed the same opportunities that I had. I knew that I had earned my place in the incoming class through my hard work and solid academic achievement. I felt entitled to enter through the gates of higher education and follow the well-lit, well-worn path that people like me had been travelling for generations. The people who remained on the outside of the gates had simply not taken advantage of the opportunities they were given.
or had not worked hard enough to earn a place on the grassy quad. They were not like me. When I arrived at college in the fall of 1996, my beliefs were confirmed as I entered a space where I unquestionably belonged.

My undergraduate experience radically changed me. My experiences of having “belonged” in virtually every space I entered allowed me to be completely unaware that I was a racist. When my professors and classmates challenged me to face some uncomfortable truths about race in America, I started to evolve into a person who was more self-aware and critical of the very systems that had served my interests and continue to serve my interests to this day. These experiences have shaped who I am as a professional and a researcher. The articles that follow are the product of this vast but incomplete ideological transformation that I have undergone since my graduation from high school. This work is important. What I have learned from my research has already led to changes in how I approach my professional work as an admissions officer and I am hopeful that it will motivate more admissions officers to train a critical eye on the systems they work in.

Each of the three manuscripts that follow are drawn from the qualitative research I conducted with admissions officers at public colleges in New England over the course of eighteen months. Through textual analysis of college websites, surveys, and semi-structured interviews, I sought to understand how college admissions officers made sense of their role in shaping access to higher education. Creswell (2014) described qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (pg. 4). In this quest for understanding, qualitative researchers seek to explore the experiences and beliefs of individuals as they
exist in a particular context (Galletta & Cross, 2013). The pursuit of this understanding requires situating the individual or phenomenon being studied within the systems that it operates. Qualitative researchers explore complex phenomena that are not easily isolated or measured. In fact, much qualitative research aims to do the opposite and embraces complexity of context in pursuit of deeper understanding. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) offered a simple explanation that helped guide my thinking about why a qualitative approach was best for this study by characterizing qualitative research as a means of generating hypotheses rather than testing them.

The principal aim of this study was to add to literature dealing with college access and to better understand how admissions officers view their role in shaping access to higher education. There is no shortage of scholarly inquiry into the numerous causes of inequity in access to higher education in the United States. Many of these studies focus broadly on structural or systemic factors that restrict access to college. These studies provided critical context for my investigation of the role of admissions officers in shaping access to higher education in the US. With this in mind, this qualitative study was rooted specifically in narrative inquiry as a means to best collect and share the perspectives and experiences of admissions officers. Narrative research involves the collection and retelling of individual stories of personal experience. This requires that researchers understand the experiences of participants and carefully construct the context from which these stories emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2014).

Participants in this study were admissions officers at public, 4-year colleges and universities in the northeastern United States. Using National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data, I identified institutions that met the following criteria:
Public colleges or universities

Competitive admission

Awards 4-year degrees

Participation was solicited through the New England Association of College Admissions Counselors (NEACAC) listserv, the NEACAC Facebook group, direct email communication, and by distributing invitation letters at regional college fairs. (See appendix B for examples of the solicitation letter). Interested parties completed a brief screening survey which addressed the following:

- Application caseload
- Years of experience in the field
- Race/Ethnicity of Admissions Officer
- Gender of Admissions Officer

This process yielded twenty-one participants.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

As stated previously, this study centered on the experiences of college admissions officers and how they understand their roles as institutional gatekeepers. I sought to learn how admissions officers view their experiences in evaluating college applications and interpreting and applying institutional directives that inform those decisions. As such, the primary source of data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014; Galletta & Cross, 2013; Seidman, 2015). The interview protocol was carefully crafted to
guide the exchange between myself and participants while providing ample opportunity for participants to share as much of their understanding and perspective as possible. (See appendix A for a sample of the interview protocol.) Because the interviews were conducted in a single session, it was critical to allow a significant degree of latitude in participant responses to completely record their perspective. The semi-structured approach also provided a forum for an exchange between me as the researcher and the interviewee. Most importantly, this approach to the interviews allowed me to ask for clarification or greater detail as the interviews unfolded (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Kvale, 2008). There were numerous instances during the interview process where valuable insights emerged in conversations that followed initial responses to questions.

The setting for the interviews was also important in ensuring the completeness and accuracy of the data gathered. Like most things in the field of education, however, the initial plan for data collection was upended by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Kvale (2008) and Patton (2016) wrote of the importance of providing interview spaces where participants feel comfortable and safe. The pandemic made safely conducting in-person interviews impossible and I had to complete all remaining data collection using an easily accessible video conferencing platform. This eliminated any threat to the physical health of participants, but it was also necessary to take steps to mitigate any other potential threats to their personal and professional wellbeing. The nature of this study posed several potential threats to the comfort and safety of participants that were important to address in order to protect the admissions officers and ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data collected.
Protecting the anonymity of participants throughout the process was essential in both guaranteeing their safety and ensuring that they were comfortable in describing their experiences and perspectives. There is some degree of risk inherent in speaking about institutional policies related to admissions. Some admissions officers, for example, shared perspectives on institutional policies and practices that could have potentially put their jobs in jeopardy. In an effort to mitigate this risk, initial interviews were conducted in an off-campus location or virtual space that the participants selected themselves. This limited the risk that our conversations would be overheard by a colleague or supervisor. The first three interviews, for example, were conducted in coffee shops that the participants selected as places that they felt comfortable in sharing their stories.

Managing potential threats to participants was achieved both through my design of the data collection process and by trusting the judgment of the participants. This risk was easier to manage when I was forced to shift to using Zoom for the remainder of data collection as most participants were working remotely. In an effort to mitigate any remaining risk, I offered participants a great deal of latitude in choosing the dates and times of interviews. This allowed them to select times where they could guarantee their privacy during the interviews. Lastly, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant as well as to the schools they work for to protect their anonymity when this research was presented.

**Documents Related to Institutional Admissions Policies and Practices**

While the interviews served as a primary data source, I was also interested in the contexts in which the admissions officers worked. As such, admissions criteria and policies were a critical piece of data. Promotional documents and websites provided
valuable contextual evidence in the study. These documents were publicly available and provided data that was useful in both providing a framework for understanding how admissions officers viewed the higher education ecosystem but also provided valuable context for future interviews and data analysis (Hatch, 2002). Hatch (2002) wrote of the advantage of using “unobtrusive data” as a “stimulus in interview interactions” (p.119).

In this study, the collection and analysis of website data provided me with a more informed perspective while listening to participant responses during interviews. For example, one participant spoke at length about an alternative admission program that she felt limited her role in evaluating applications. Completing the initial review and coding of website data and the institutional descriptions of this program prior to our interview allowed me to be a more productive listener during the interview. For the purposes of this study, admissions criteria that I sought out included the following:

- Academic courses required (level of courses: AP, Honors, College Preparatory)
- Standardized Test Scores
- Non-academic assets (extracurricular activities, leadership positions, employment, etc.)

Admissions requirements provide valuable insight into how an institution views its role as an educational institution as well as its place in society in general (Dorn, 2017).

A third source of data was the admissions websites that colleges and universities used to communicate institutional policies to prospective students. I included websites in the study because they are the primary vehicle through which institutions and admissions officers communicate an institutional identity as well as a vision of who “belongs” in the
campus community. They were especially important after the onset of the pandemic as they were one of the few means for students to gather information about admissions policies when most traditional recruitment activities were halted. Institutional websites were selected using the same selection criteria that I used in determining eligibility for interview participants. The initial search yielded 45 4-year public colleges in New England. After eliminating schools that specialized in a very narrow range of disciplines and institutions that operated multiple campuses with identical admissions policies, 32 institutions were included in my study.

College and university websites are complex and include vast amounts of information, much of which was not relevant to this study. Using my experience in working with students navigating websites and as well as my work in helping design content at my own institution, I selected a series of pages that would most likely be visited by prospective students seeking information about institutional admissions policies. The following pages were included in the review of each institutional website:

- Admissions “landing page” - this is the page that prospective students were directed to after clicking on the “Admissions” or “Admissions and Financial Aid” links on the institution’s homepage.

- “First Year Students” or “Applicants” - this page generally provided information for students who had not already attended another institution. Admissions policies for transfer students differ considerably from those for first-year applicants and were not relevant to this study.
“Admissions Requirements” page- this page typically outlined the requirements for admission to each institution as well as some information about how applications were evaluated.

Using Evernote, I captured screenshots of each page and preserved the links embedded on the pages to allow for continued exploration throughout data analysis. This allowed me to both capture the text and images embedded on the websites but also the links that students would use to navigate between each site. This was immensely valuable during the coding process as I was able to revisit not only the pages themselves but the pathways between them throughout multiple rounds of coding and data analysis (See appendix C).

**Data Analysis**

Throughout this study, recorded interview data were transcribed and coded. Given the exploratory nature of this study, I began the coding process without an established coding scheme to allow a greater degree of flexibility in organizing and preparing the data for analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2014). Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) described the process of systematically reviewing data with the goal of moving from a collection of raw text to an understanding of how themes that emerge from the data shed illuminate “research concerns”. Interview recordings were transcribed soon after completion to allow for nearly immediate review of the raw data. This approach allowed me to systematically review the data as I completed interviews and helped avoid becoming overwhelmed by the process when the pace of interviews accelerated. I completed five interviews during the first month of the
study before an extended period where the pace of interviews slowed considerably with the onset of recruitment season.

Data analysis began with the creation of a secure digital file for each participant. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and interview transcripts, notes, and relevant memos were organized in a password-protected digital file. I began the initial review of the raw data by carefully reading each transcript without formally assigning any codes. This allowed me to make an initial review of the data and also confirm the accuracy of the transcription (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Saldana, 2011). During this process, I made some initial notes on the digital documents and transferred notes that I had taken during the interviews to the completed transcripts. The process of organizing all of the documents related to data collection was a critical part of my analysis as it forced me to carefully and systematically consider what role each analytic memo or reflection might play in uncovering the story that would ultimately emerge from the data.

During a second review of the data derived from the first five interviews, I was able to group text into more manageable categories of what Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) referred to as “relevant text”. It was at this point that I found the process of working with digital transcripts to be limiting and I decided to begin my initial round of coding using printed copies. My first review of the printed transcripts involved identifying words and phrases that appeared across multiple transcripts as well as making notes of areas where I potentially needed clarification from the participant. This process unquestionably led to improved technique in subsequent interviews as I was able to respond more thoughtfully and intentionally to participant responses. As categories emerged from the raw interview data through this process of “open coding” (Bogdan &
Biklen, 2007), I constructed a more refined set of categories and codes to organize the data (see appendix C).

I borrowed from the broad tenets of discourse analysis as a tool to systematically analyze this data and identify commonalities in how individual admissions officers respond to questions (Rogers, 2011; Talja, 1999). The initial round of open coding yielded 136 unique codes. I compiled the list in a spreadsheet as a means to both organize and define each code. (See appendix C.) This allowed me to immediately eliminate any redundant codes but also challenged me to create concise and consistent definitions for each. The process of assigning definitions to codes was extremely helpful in narrowing the initial collection as I found numerous instances where I had assigned different codes to similar or identical passages in the transcripts. For example, after the first round of coding all of the transcripts, I had assigned four different codes to designate passages where admissions officers spoke of how institutional policies positioned students as customers. Systematically defining each code was a time consuming but essential part of refining my approach to data analysis.

After narrowing the initial list of 136 codes, I printed a fresh set of unmarked copies of each transcript and completed another round of coding with the refined list. I approached the coding of the “clean” transcripts with a more informed perspective. I had a clearer understanding of the pathways that each interview took and a more refined understanding of the meaning of the codes I had assigned during the first round of coding. After completing the second round of analysis with the clearly defined set of codes, I was able to narrow the original set to approximately 40-45 unique codes. At the conclusion of this round of coding I began to see a more distinct set of themes starting to
emerge from the data that had previously been obscured by the somewhat disorderly first set of undefined codes. As is the nature of qualitative research, some of the unclear or redundant themes that I referenced in my interview notes became more meaningful after this second review.

The increased clarity and direction at this stage of analysis generated a degree of anxiety as my initial rough categories of codes seemed to be leading in some well-defined but distinctly different directions. I had built the interview protocol to explore how admissions officers viewed their roles in the process of reviewing applications but the stories that emerged from those interviews addressed areas of their professional responsibilities that I had not anticipated. I had, for example, fully expected to hear admissions officers express their feelings about specific admission policies but did not anticipate the extent to which they viewed their responsibilities in recruitment and marketing as related to their application review role. I persistently reminded myself of the inductive nature of the qualitative process as I let the data drive stories.

In an effort to create a visual roadmap to identify if my research had in fact produced enough new knowledge to move forward, I literally drew the map. I started by assigning color codes in my codebook to identify broad categories where I believed each might fit (see appendix A). At the conclusion of this process I had six broad categories of codes that spanned a very wide range of admissions officer experiences. I then created a rough Venn Diagram in an effort to make better sense of the relationships between the categories that I defined in my review of the refined set of codes. These categories were:

- Identity
- Gatekeeping
• Policy
• Relationship Building
• Strategic Enrollment Management
• Merit and “Valuing Students”

This visual representation was instrumental in shaping my subsequent approach to data analysis as it allowed me to see distinct relationships and interconnectedness between the categories (Saldana, 2011). It was at this stage that I was first able to see what would ultimately be the three articles that emerged from the data. “Identity” and “Relationship Building”, for example, encompassed the stories admissions officers shared as they considered their roles in shaping access to higher education (Gatekeepers vs. Access Agents) but also their understanding of their roles as sales agents (Strategic Enrollment Management/Merit and “Valuing Students). It was through this process that the themes of “Business of Higher Education”, “Access Agents/Gatekeepers”, and “Policy/Belonging” emerged.

I assigned a color to each of the three main themes and again reviewed each of the transcripts. After finding it somewhat confusing working with previously marked transcripts, I once again printed “clean” copies of each and began the process of color coding passages based on the three themes. In order to show areas where there was considerable overlap between the themes I modeled this approach on the Venn Diagram that had been so helpful in previous analysis. If a passage primarily fell under the theme of “Policy and Belonging” I would circle it in blue. I then used a highlighter to mark specific words and passages to designate which categories they fell under. For example, a passage that addressed the growing prominence of business practices in higher
education would be circled in red while words and phrases within the passage that belonged within the theme of “Policy and Belonging” were highlighted in green. This allowed me to organize the data in a way that allowed me to see the interrelationship between the themes amidst a large and complex collection of data.

**Analysis of Website Data**

I adopted a very similar approach to the analysis of institutional website data as I did the data derived from interviews. After collecting all of the screenshots of each institution’s admissions web pages as I described above, I spent time acquainting myself with the data. This process was akin to my initial reading of the interview transcripts. Because links were preserved in the Evernote screenshots, I was able to navigate through each set of pages while preserving page content that was present on the day that the screenshot was taken. This was important because college websites change frequently and it would have been extremely difficult to manage a changing data set. The initial wander through website data was an important step in familiarizing myself with both what information was typically presented on each page but also how students might access the information. After several reviews of each page, I began constructing a map or framework to guide my analysis. This map allowed me to visualize how students might navigate between pages and also provided a visual representation of what information was typically found on each page. This composite “image” of the page data was extremely helpful in organizing my first effort at coding the website data. (See appendix D.)

I approached document analysis borrowing from Bowen (2009) and Rogers (2011) by first working to develop a clear understanding of the purpose of the documents
within the context that they were produced. College websites serve both a promotional and an information sharing function. The promotional function of the websites, for example, was an important consideration when analysing the language used in describing how prospective students became parts of the campus community. Context is always critically important in document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Rogers, 2011) but was especially important due to the timing of my study. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic made face-to-face recruitment impossible and college websites became even more important sources of information for prospective students. The prominence of college admissions websites in the application process changed considerably during my study and it was important to consider this during data analysis.

After completing a three tiered review of the documents (Bowen, 2009), five prominent themes emerged. Three of the themes (“valuing students”, “students as customers”, “the business of higher education”) aligned with data derived from the interview data and provided critical confirming or complementary evidence. Two of the most prominent themes (Inclusivity/Welcoming and Exclusivity) initially seemed contradictory but ultimately became central elements of the manuscript dealing with how colleges communicate “belonging” on their campuses. Situating the websites in their appropriate contexts was essential in gaining a better understanding of how these themes shaped the messaging embedded in college websites. Analysing interview data and documentary data simultaneously helped in establishing this context as I was able to better understand how the themes of “inclusivity and welcoming” and “exclusivity” actually fit hand-in-hand in websites promoting the colleges and universities in the study.
Trustworthiness and Credibility

I have worked in college admissions for 17 years. My position as an “insider” in the field of college admissions provided definite advantages in conducting this study but also posed challenges to establishing the credibility of my findings. Kleinmann and Copp (1993), argued that researcher identity plays an important role in the collection and analysis of data. Failure to acknowledge researcher positionality and potential bias compromises the entire research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Kleinman & Copp, 1993). In an effort to address threats to trustworthiness and credibility I compiled a detailed research journal throughout the course of the study. The research journal was a tool for me to critically reflect on the study and, most importantly, my role in collecting and analyzing the data. This critical reflection was especially important in analysis as the story of the admissions officer started to emerge from the data.

In an effort to ensure that my interpretation of the data accurately reflected what participants intended to convey during the interviews, I conducted several follow-up interviews with participants to solicit clarification or to confirm my analysis of their responses. This member checking (Carlson, 2010; Creswell & Miller, 2000) served as a second tier in an effort to mitigate the effects of bias in data analysis. The manuscripts that follow tell the stories that emerged from data that I collected over the span of eighteen months. The first article explores how colleges and universities construct who “belongs” in their communities. It draws on data collected from 32 college websites to show how the description of institutional admissions policies can position some students as outsiders before they even submit an application. This practice has important
implications for higher education access as it often communicates that historically marginalized students do not “belong” as part of the mainstream campus community.

The second manuscript explores the extent to which higher education is a business in which admissions officers become enrollment managers, and the implications this has on college access. Public colleges and universities are adopting practices related to recruitment, application review, and financial aid that were once found exclusively in the private sector. This new emphasis on application yield and enrollment management has important implications for higher education access for marginalized students because they are too often casualties of institutional policies that favor efficiency and profit over equity in access. The final manuscript tells the stories of how admissions officers understand their roles as “gatekeepers” and “access agents” in the rapidly evolving world of higher education. It shares the voices of professionals who have a profound impact on higher education access but have been largely unheard from in recent research in the field. It is my hope that these three manuscripts tell the stories that college admissions officers have not had a chance to tell, and that these stories shed light on questions of equity and access in higher education.
MANUSCRIPT 1—How College and Universities Construct Belonging on Campus

To be submitted to *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.

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Introduction

Perhaps the most significant higher education policy change that accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic was the decision by most colleges and universities to temporarily waive their standardized test requirement. In a 2020 story about the impact of test-optional policies on prospective applicants, WPRIX podcast, *This American Life*, shared the stories of talented students who saw the shift to test-optional as an opportunity for them to have a realistic chance to attend schools that they previously believed were out-of-reach for them. Without the burden of test scores dampening hopes and eligibility checklists, prospective students reimagined these ivy-covered walls as open invitations rather than barriers. And many got in (Glass, 2021). While many less-selective schools saw significant drops in application numbers, the nation’s most selective institutions saw unprecedented spikes in application volume. In the 2021 academic year, Harvard University saw a 42% increase in applications over the previous year (Lu & Tsotsong, 2021). These significant increases in applicants at ultra-selective, elite colleges and universities seems to show the extent to which many students saw their standardized test scores as a barrier to accessing higher education. Their SAT or ACT scores situated them outside of the community that “belonged” at these institutions. Student perceptions of institutional belonging can influence how they approach the college search and application process and have a meaningful impact on access to higher education. In the pages that follow, I examine how colleges and universities communicate who belongs in their communities through academic policies that are described on their websites and the significant impact this has on questions of equity and inclusion.
As part of a larger study of how college admissions officers understand their roles in shaping access to higher education, this article aims to add to the literature on inequity in access to higher education in the United States by better understanding how colleges and universities construct both their own identities and visions of who belongs in their communities. This study critically examined how colleges and universities use their websites, policies, and admissions programs to both define and communicate who “belongs” in their campus communities. It is grounded in Critical Race Theory with emphasis on how race, class, and gender impact access to higher education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor, 2009). As a theoretical tool, Critical Race Theory holds that racism is deeply entrenched in all segments of American society and works in tandem with other forms of discrimination and subordination to preserve systems of privilege (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Yosso et al., 2009). As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue, it is the depth of this entrenchment that obscures the extent to which racial hierarchies determine the distribution of power and opportunity in the US (Delgado et al., 2017). In the college admissions process specifically, it is notions of “meritocracy” -- a “colorblind” concept that broadly informs how admissions officers evaluate “college readiness” -- that affirms the framing of historically marginalized populations as deficient relative to whites and thus, not deserving of the same opportunities in higher education (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Yosso, 2005). In the context of college admissions, seemingly archaic policies that explicitly exclude populations of students -- “White Students Only Apply” -- have been replaced by ones that achieve similar ends but elude critique because they are carefully written using race-neutral language. College websites and promotional materials are perhaps the best illustration of this phenomenon
in the modern market for higher education. This was especially true when the Covid-19 pandemic limited the opportunities for prospective students to visit campuses or engage with admissions officers. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, college websites and social media presence became the voice of the institution.

**Methodology**

This article is the product of a larger study investigating how admissions officers understand their roles in shaping access to higher education. The study as a whole uses qualitative methodology including survey methods, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis. This article in particular draws from the data I collected, analyzed and interpreted from college websites, specifically how selected colleges and universities communicated who belonged on their campuses through descriptions of institutional admissions criteria and policies on their websites. Admissions policies provided valuable insight into how a college views its role as an educational institution as well as who it welcomes in its campus community (Dorn, 2017).

Using National Center for Educational Statistic (NCES) data, I identified institutions that met the following criteria:

- **Public colleges or universities:** Public colleges enroll significantly more students than private institutions. Admissions officers at public colleges review a higher volume of applicants than those employed at private colleges.
- **Competitive admission:** Applications are reviewed for admissibility/ not open admission- applicants are reviewed and decisions made based on institutional admissions requirements.
- Awards 4-year degrees: This will ensure uniformity in the application of admissions standards. Institutions that award both 2-year and 4-year degrees may apply different standards of admission depending on which program a student has applied to.

After eliminating the satellite campuses for colleges that operated in multiple locations with identical programs and requirements, I was left with a sample of 31 unique institutions.

College and university websites house a complex network of individual pages. I limited the scope of this study to the pages that would most likely be visited by prospective applicants and their families. These pages included:

- The main college website from which all other pages are accessed
- Admissions “landing page”
- First-year student page
- “Admissions Requirements” page
- Pages linked to the “First-year student” page that describe alternative admissions programs for first-year students (if applicable)

I collected screenshots of the content included on each page that I then coded them, using the lens of Critical Race Theory to help me frame my analysis of how each school understood and represented equity, exclusivity, and inclusion.

I employed a three phase approach to analysis as outlined by Bowen (2009) which included an initial “superficial examination” of the data, followed by a “thorough examination” and concluded with an interpretive phase. After several reviews of each
page, I began constructing a map or framework to guide my analysis. This map allowed me to visualize how students might navigate between pages and also provided a visual representation of what information was typically found on each page. This composite “image” of the page data was extremely helpful in organizing my first effort at coding the website data (See appendix A.)

After completing a three-tiered review of the documents (Bowen, 2009), five prominent themes emerged. Three of the themes (“valuing students”, “students as customers”, “the business of higher education”) aligned with data derived from the interview data in my larger study and provided critical confirming or complementary evidence. Two of the most prominent themes (Inclusivity/Welcoming and Exclusivity) initially seemed contradictory but ultimately became central elements of this manuscript dealing with how colleges communicate “belonging” on their campuses.

Bowen (2009) and Rogers (2011) both suggest that this kind of document analysis relies on developing a clear understanding of the *purpose* of the documents within the *context* that they were produced. College websites serve both a promotional and an information-sharing function. The promotional function of the websites, for example, was an important consideration when analyzing the language used in describing how prospective students became parts of the campus community. The information-sharing function of the websites was especially important due to the timing of this study. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic made face-to-face recruitment impossible and college websites became even more important sources of information for prospective students. The prominence of college admissions websites in the application and recruitment process changed considerably during my study and it was important to consider this
context during data analysis. Websites and promotional publications went from being a complementary source of information to a vitally important tool for recruiting and sharing policies with prospective students.

**Exclusivity and Defining Belonging**

Exclusivity is a defining feature of American higher education (Dorn, 2017). Since the founding of New College, (renamed Harvard University) in 1636, American colleges and universities crafted admissions guidelines and standards that narrowly defined who was welcome in a particular campus community. In the 18th century, for example, Harvard president Increase Mather proposed using a religious test as a bulwark against what he perceived to be a “growing tendency toward liberalism” that threatened the young institution’s Calvinist identity (Broome, 1903; Dorn, 2017; Thelin, 2011). Religion was but one factor that shaped access to colonial higher education and throughout the colonial period, higher education remained the nearly exclusive domain of the propertied, white, elite, males. That is who “belonged”.

The 19th century ushered in a period of rapid growth in access to education in the United States. The expansion of primary and secondary education through “common schools” reflected a new focus on the public role of education (Dorn, 2017; Mondale & Patton, 2001). It was also during the 19th century that public high schools overtook private preparatory academies as the primary place of education for future college students (Broome, 1903; Mondale & Patton, 2001; Thelin, 2011). Prior to the Civil War, however, formal education remained the nearly exclusive domain of propertied whites. It was not until after Reconstruction that meaningful numbers of African American and other marginalized students gained access to K-12 education and educational access gaps
began to narrow (Snyder, 1993). As I outlined later in this article, access did not necessarily mean that these students “belonged” in the campus community, and students of color and poor whites remained at the margins of academia in America.

During the last three decades of the 19th century, enrollment in American colleges and universities rose from 62,839 in 1869 to 237,592 in 1900 (Snyder, 1993). Still, legal barriers to broadening access to higher education persisted nationally until the middle of the 20th century. The 1954 *Brown* decision and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 weakened some of the legal barriers that kept students of color out of college but led to more subtle measures to limit access to higher education (Dorn, 2017; Thelin, 2011). Just as their colonial forbears did, colleges and universities adapted to the changing demographic and legal landscape to shape their campus communities as they saw fit. To this end, colleges and universities crafted definitions of “merit” and admissibility that allowed them to maintain exclusive pathways to higher education without explicitly violating the law (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Guess, 2006; Thelin, 2011).

The end of the 20th century saw continued increases in the demand for higher education paired with continued growth in the number of postsecondary institutions in the United States (Thelin, 2011). The onset of the 21st century ushered in a period where access to higher education is more important than ever. In an increasingly competitive global job market, postsecondary education is often a prerequisite for access to the most lucrative and stable career fields (Carnevale et al., 2013; Carnevale et al., 2016). This growing importance of higher education makes ensuring equity in both access and completion rates for all students a significant priority for leaders at both the secondary
and postsecondary levels. Access, retention, and completion are all influenced by the extent to which students feel that they are valued and welcome members of the campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). How colleges define who “belongs” in the community can have a significant impact on what students choose to apply to a school as well as their likelihood of completing a degree (Hossler et al., 2015; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019).

**Who Belongs?**

Like nearly all American industries, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the field of higher education. Despite its growing importance in the 21st century job market, the upheaval caused by the pandemic meant just 62% of recent high school graduates pursued postsecondary education in the fall of 2020 (Carnevale et al., 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Of this group, a smaller percentage attended 4-year colleges which generally are more selective than open enrollment community colleges. This exclusivity is but one element influencing how prospective students view the extent to which they “belong” in a campus community. Harper (2013) in Vaccaro (2016) described the “social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in US social institutions” (p.925) that has shaped how marginalized students understand their place in US higher education. Harper argued that underrepresentation is often accompanied by hostile campus climates where marginalized students are constructed as deficient and outsiders in the community. Shapiro (2012) wrote of how colleges and universities construct students as either “citizens” or “aliens” in her study of Linguistic Minority students at a 4-year university. Shapiro argued that constructing students as “aliens” within a campus community has a profound negative
impact on their likelihood to succeed academically and ultimately earn a
degree. Strayhorn (2019) also wrote of the importance of “belonging” in psychological
well-being and how the desire for belonging can influence choices college students make
as they navigate the admission process. In the context of higher education, a strong sense
of belonging has been associated with positive outcomes both academically and socially
(Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Importantly, the extent to which students
feel that they belong in a campus community can have significant ramifications for equity
in access to stable and lucrative career fields.

Others have also taken up the study of belonging as a key element in student
success. Strayhorn (2019) wrote that a, “sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived
social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of
mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the
campus community” (p. 4). The perception of being “valued” and “important to the
campus community” is especially relevant in my examination of how colleges and
universities communicate who is, in fact, valued and important on their individual
campuses before students even apply to be a part of them. Tinto (2017) wrote of the
importance of a sense of belonging in student academic success and persistence in higher
education. Developing this critically important sense of belonging relies on colleges and
universities creating hospitable campus environments where current and prospective
students feel a sense that they are wanted and valued by the institution and its students,
faculty, and staff. Tinto wrote of the importance of students seeing the campus
community as “welcoming and supportive” and that the campus culture is “one of
inclusion” (p. 4). This is especially challenging for college enrollment management
teams as they endeavor to communicate a welcoming and inclusive environment while simultaneously depicting an image of a selective and exclusive community.

**Language of Selectivity and Exclusivity**

While the way in which institutions promote exclusivity varies, virtually all selective colleges and universities publish what criteria are used in evaluating applications. These admissions criteria and descriptions of how they are applied in evaluating applications communicate to prospective students who academically “belongs” in the campus community. How this is communicated can have important implications for postsecondary access and retention as students start to imagine who they want to be in their new college community. This juncture -- entering college life -- has a great deal of significance. As Strayhorn (2019) wrote:

> There is substantial evidence to support the notion that sense of belonging takes on special prominence at certain times such as (late) adolescence and early adulthood when individuals begin to consider who they are (or wish to be), with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their time and energies (p.35).

The transition to postsecondary education represents a place where students seek belonging and how they approach this transition can be influenced by how colleges communicate who belongs on campus (Hossler et al., 2015; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). More selective institutions such as the flagship universities reviewed in this study potentially narrow their applicant pool in their efforts to project an image of academic excellence and selectivity. Students whose standardized test scores and grade point averages were below those highlighted in promotional materials and websites could understandably be discouraged from even applying. I recently met with a prospective student who had delayed applying to my institution because her grade point average and SAT scores were below that of the average admitted student described on our
website. Our effort to depict a high degree of academic excellence in the campus community made this student anxious that she would not belong because she did not have comparable grades to the students who the institution had deemed as “belonging”. But in truth, there are many students whose scores and GPAs fall below the average admitted student and they are still offered admission based on other attributes in their application. Still, this example pointedly shows how students view their likelihood of belonging in a particular campus has a powerful impact on their behavior in deciding whether or not to pursue higher education.

Prestige and selectivity are important parts of institutional identity and play a role in determining how colleges and universities market themselves to prospective students so that students feel the sense of “belonging” I discuss above. In communicating this selectivity, however, many of the colleges and universities create narrow definitions of college readiness and admissibility that dismiss or undervalue academic and non-academic assets that some marginalized students possess (Kanno & Grosik, 2012; Oropeza et al., 2010; Varghese, 2012). It is in the effort to communicate selectivity and academic excellence that some colleges position large segments of the potential applicant pool as “outsiders” who do not belong in the mainstream campus community. As was the case with the student I mentioned above, this is often done when communicating who belongs in the campus community by highlighting who makes up the student population.

Several institutions published statistical descriptions of their incoming classes or overall student bodies to communicate who was typically allowed entry. The University of Connecticut, for example, uses a large infographic on their undergraduate admission website to communicate which students are typically admitted, which students
“belong”. UConn carefully showcases its campus diversity and its selectivity, both inviting students in and making clear that those selected are unique and special for being chosen. The infographic touts a large applicant pool of over 30,000 and a diverse first-year student body of over 3,800 students. They are also careful to project exclusivity when describing the incoming class as including that more than half of freshmen were in the top 10% of their graduating classes with the “middle 50%” of students having SAT scores ranging between 1235 and 1390. UMass Amherst adopted a nearly identical approach in promoting academic exclusivity in their campus community. In a pre-pandemic promotional infographic, the most selective of the UMass institutions described its largest incoming class as being extremely diverse and academically accomplished with an average grade point average of 3.92 and SAT scores of 1292 (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2020). While both institutions admit students with academic profiles outside of those listed on their websites, they opted to highlight the quality of their student body using these SAT and GPA ranges, thus communicating that these were among the most valued attributes of prospective community members. Students who possess capital (Yosso, 2005) and academic strengths that are not shown in SAT scores or grade point averages are not included in these profiles of those who were deemed valued members of the campus community. A high achieving student with a 900 SAT score, for example, could understandably feel apprehensive about applying to an institution where the most valued community members had significantly higher scores.

**Diversity and Academic Coursework**

Many American colleges and universities face a complicated dilemma when describing how they evaluate applications. Institutions face the challenge of promoting
the image of an open and inclusive environment while simultaneously depicting themselves as a selective or exclusive community (Beale, 2012; Hossler et al., 2015). Institutional promotional materials and websites go to great lengths to depict campus environments as welcoming and diverse. In fact, most colleges and universities include a commitment to diversity in the mission statements that are featured prominently in these promotional materials (LePeau et al., 2018). Kuh and Whitt (1988) wrote of how institutions often promote commitments to equity and diversity while instituting policies that narrow opportunities for marginalized populations. For example, when I began my career as an admissions officer in 2005, the institution I worked for employed a policy that gave preferential treatment to applicants from secondary schools that placed more than 60% of their graduates in 4-year colleges. Students who attended “competitive” schools could be admitted with a lower class rank or grade point average than their peers who attended schools that placed fewer students at 4-year colleges. This policy effectively compounded the advantages that these students enjoyed by virtue of the fact that they attended well-resourced schools with already high college attendance rates. Despite publicizing an institutional commitment to serving an increasingly diverse community, we employed admissions policies that broadened the pathway to admission for students in more affluent suburban districts.

Amid the images depicting a dynamic and diverse student body, colleges and universities generally provide some description of what criteria are used in evaluating applications. Despite significant changes in both the demographics of students seeking to earn a 4-year college degree (the proportion of white students enrolled in degree granting HEI has decreased from nearly 80% in 1990 to 55.2% in 2018) and the demands of the
21st century job market, the criteria used to evaluate “college readiness” have evolved very little in the last 50 years (Beale, 2012; Thelin, 2011). The admissions requirements that helped shape the campus communities of the second half of the 20th century are largely unchanged even as an increasingly diverse pool of prospective applicants applies to colleges. I reviewed the admissions criteria of 32 public, 4-year colleges and universities in New England and found virtually no variation in the academic requirements required for entry to each. Each institution required courses in five core disciplines of English, Mathematics, Natural Science, Social Science, and Modern Languages. While a few referred to elective courses, it was very clear that academic readiness for college was measured using this narrow set of courses and standardized test scores.

Communicating a narrow definition of college readiness and admissibility to prospective students can have a profound impact on those students who present academic and personal assets that fall outside of these criteria. Yosso (2005) wrote of the broad range of personal, academic, and cultural assets that marginalized students possess that often go unacknowledged or undervalued in the college admissions process. This is evident in my review of the admissions policies employed by the institutions in this study. Students who possess “capital” outside of the criteria outlined on the admissions website are positioned outside of the mainstream applicants before even applying.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this phenomenon is in the case of English Learners whose ESL courses pose logistical challenges to their completing all of the academic coursework necessary to be admitted to a 4-year college because they were completing ESL classes in high school. Despite often speaking multiple languages, it is
common for such students to fall short of college admission requirements because they have not taken the required number of “foreign language” courses (Kanno & Grosik, 2012; Oropeza et al., 2010). Institutional admissions policies published on college websites have the effect of constructing Linguistic Minority students and others who have academic strengths and assets outside of the narrow academic requirements of the colleges in this study as academically deficient (Shapiro, 2012). Plymouth State University, for example, requires that students complete the standard range of courses in English, mathematics, natural science, social science, and foreign language. Their website goes on to explain that “Successful applicants generally earn between a 2.5-3.5 cumulative GPA (on a 4.0 scale) in the five core subject areas listed above and are involved in some type of extra-curricular activity or activities” (Plymouth State University, 2020). In this case, academic readiness is evaluated using grades earned in the five “core” areas and work outside of that realm is presumably not considered. This is an example in which strengths that lie outside of the five listed academic disciplines are undervalued by the institution which impacts students’ sense of whether they belong in the applicant pool at all.

The University of New Hampshire employs a similar policy for evaluating applications by only including courses in English, Science, Mathematics, Social Science, and Modern Languages in the grade point average used for determining admissibility (University of New Hampshire, 2020). Like many institutions, UNH also weighs honors and Advanced Placement courses more heavily in the GPA recalculation. Despite including a statement that this practice does not put students without the opportunity to enroll in such courses at a competitive disadvantage, there is no clear explanation of how
they achieve this. Weighing Advanced Placement and honors courses more heavily in the admissions decision communicates to prospective students that the institution values the fact that they have challenged themselves in high school. Unfortunately, there are significant opportunity gaps in the AP program and low-income students in urban districts often have fewer opportunities to enroll in such courses (College Board, 2020). These students have historically been positioned as outsiders in the US higher education system and admissions policies such as these could potentially have a significant impact on their perceptions of belonging in college.

Southern Connecticut University represents another example whereby colleges acknowledge only a narrow range of academic assets in the admissions process. Their website communicates that “strong candidates for admission” will have a grade point average of 2.7 or higher and have completed core course requirements in English, Mathematics, Natural Science, Social Science, and Modern Languages. This language implies that any prospective applicant who falls outside of this relatively narrow set of criteria is something other than a “strong candidate”. Students who attend secondary schools that offer a curriculum that deviates from the 17-18 “college preparatory” units that are required by most colleges are categorized as something other than “strong” or “ideal” candidates.

Of the 32 schools that I reviewed for this article, only one (Castleton) referred to how they evaluate applications from students whose academic transcripts reflect learning experiences that differ from a more traditional high school curriculum. Students who attend the Metropolitan Career and Technical Center (The Met) in Rhode Island, for example, enjoy a range of learning experiences that are unheard of in most traditional
high schools. Learning through internships and in small tight knit communities, the MET offers an integrated approach to secondary education. The unique curriculum and approach to instruction at the MET cannot be communicated through a traditional transcript and nearly all graduates do not fit the profiles of successful candidates at the schools included in this study. MET students exhibit high levels of aspirational capital as they navigate their pathways to higher education and seek opportunities at institutions where they “belong”. Unfortunately, the curriculum and approach to learning at the MET is not easily communicated using a traditional transcript and students face unique challenges in communicating the strengths and capital that make them potentially strong contributors to the campus community. Faced with the reality that their curriculum and mode of instruction positioned their students as outsiders, The Met even went to the length of creating a transcript that attempted to convert their students’ unique learning experiences into the 18 “college preparatory” units that most colleges demanded. MET students, like all others whose personal and academic strengths position them outside of the widely accepted definition of “college readiness” face the challenge of belonging in the applicant pool at many colleges before even setting foot on campus.

**Standardized Testing and Academic “Merit”**

Beyond the evaluation of high school academic coursework, standardized testing has historically been one of the most powerful determiners of student sense of belonging for prospective college students (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Guinier, 2015). On countless occasions, I have met with extremely bright and academically accomplished students who feel compelled to explain that they are “not good test takers” rather than focusing on their academic records or contributions to their school communities. The
SAT has been the source of considerable anxiety for generations of college hopefuls as it has historically played an important role in determining who gets into selective institutions (Beale, 2012; Guinier, 2015; Sohmer, 2013).

The Covid-19 pandemic radically changed how selective colleges and universities used standardized testing in application review and created an unprecedented opportunity for such institutions to reimagine how they use these tests in evaluating “college readiness” (Furuta, 2017; Tough, 2019). Prior to the pandemic, a relatively small but growing number of selective, 4-year colleges had adopted test-optional admissions policies. After May of 2019, most schools, even the most selective in the country, had temporarily gone “test optional”. The post-pandemic spike in applications at the nation’s most selective colleges and universities could be evidence of the extent to which SAT or ACT scores impact student beliefs that they belong at the nation’s most selective schools. Many colleges recognized this before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and adopted test-optional or test-blind admissions policies that aimed to mitigate some of the student anxiety associated with their test scores. Westfield State University explained their decision to adopt a test-optional policy as follows:

By eliminating test score requirements, we support closing the “entrance” achievement gap for those applicants typically at a greater disadvantage. Our focus in making admission decisions for first-year applicants will be on rigorous academic work and grade point average in high school, which research has shown are better predictors for academic success. Westfield State is emphasizing that 4 years of perseverance, motivation, and effort during high school bear a direct relationship to college-level work and academic achievement.

In the above passage, Westfield State acknowledges the impact that SAT scores have historically had on higher education access for marginalized students. They also appear to recognize some of the impact that the aforementioned narrow definition of
“college readiness” has had on student perception of belonging when they assign value to “perseverance, motivation, and effort” over standardized test scores.

If well implemented, test-optional policies could have a significant impact on how students view themselves as fitting in higher education. Some of the institutions in this study, however, implemented their test-optional policies in ways that provided access to the institution itself but not full citizenship or belonging. When constructed and presented as Westfield State did, test-optional admission policies have the potential to enhance feelings of institutional belonging among prospective students by eliminating the entry requirement that has historically disadvantaged marginalized students the most. Economically disadvantaged students of color are more likely to attend poorly resourced secondary schools, more likely to score lower on standardized tests, and are underrepresented in postsecondary education (Dixon-Román et al., 2013; Guinier, 2015; Zwick & Himelfarb, 2011).

Unfortunately, the implementation of some test-optional policies has the effect of further positioning students who opt not to submit scores outside of the mainstream pool of applicants. Fitchburg State University, for example, adopted a test-optional policy that is not necessarily available to all students in all situations. The FSU policy outlined a series of scenarios where students are “strongly encouraged” or even required to submit the scores as part of their application. The most important of these is the requirement that any student who wishes to be considered for any merit aid submit test scores. This policy advances the belief that SAT scores are a meaningful part of determining academic merit and who is valued enough by the institution for them to offer money tied to their
academic performance. Bridgewater State University (2020) describes their motivation for adopting a test-optional policy as follows:

Our concern has always been that students who perceive they scored poorly on the SAT/ACT (or avoided even taking it for the fear of doing poorly) may not apply to BSU thus not allowing us the opportunity to give them the opportunity to be considered for admission.

Like Fitchburg State, however, BSU does not offer any “merit” aid to students who opt to not submit their scores. While this policy can have important implications for college affordability as students who do not submit scores are ineligible to receive merit scholarships, it also communicates that the institution values students with higher test scores. Applicants with lower test scores may be granted entry to the community but they do not enjoy all the benefits of that membership. A student’s “value” to the institution is tied to their performance on standardized tests. While it is possible to enter the campus community without submitting test scores, full citizenship is reserved for those who choose to submit scores.

Another common element of test-optional policies that were communicated on the websites in this study was to require additional documentation or evidence of “college readiness” for those students who choose to not submit their scores. Salem State University’s test-optional policy was restricted to students who attended traditional high schools. Any homeschooled student or student with a “narrative transcript” was required to submit test scores (Salem State University, 2021). Keene State University explained their test optional policy was “for all students who are applying for admittance, except for those who are applying for the honors program or pursuing a nursing degree.” (Keene State University, 2021). Eastern Connecticut State University’s website states that students who opt to not submit test scores and “expect to be admitted” should submit a
“solid essay” and a “strong teacher recommendation” that are not required of applicants who submit test scores. Like FSU, ECSU also requires students to submit test scores if they are to be considered for “merit” scholarships or the institution's honors program (Eastern Connecticut State University, 2021). The messaging in these instances is clear. While these schools are willing to admit students who choose not to share their SAT or ACT scores, they are not granted full citizenship or access to merit-based benefits that are available to all students. True institutional “belonging” is reserved for those students who were able to submit satisfactory standardized test scores. The irony of all of this, of course, is that the policy created to make college more accessible to students who are typically disadvantaged by the elitism of the SAT also makes college unaffordable and inaccessible to the very same students.

**Access Through Side Door**

Beyond the policy of optional test-scores, several of the colleges included in this study offered pathways to admission that aim to broaden access for students from underserved populations. The way that these alternative pathways are presented on their websites, however, can have a powerful “othering” effect on prospective students. Framingham State University, for example, includes a link for “For applicants who are English language learners, have documented learning disabilities, or are enrolled in career/vocational technical high school programs, please make note of the admissions standards exceptions and allowances.” (Framingham State University, 2020). Classifying a student as an “exception” position them as outsiders or “aliens” before they even engage the application process (Oropeza et al., 2010; Shapiro, 2012). This framing of students as academically deficient or outsiders stands in stark contrast to much of the
language and imagery embedded in HEI websites that invite students to “join our community” or “become a Black Bear” (University of Maine, 2020).

Well-constructed access programs have historically played an important role in countering the effects of educational inequity on higher education access (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). In the context of college admissions websites and promotional materials, however, how the descriptions of these programs are framed and how they are accessed is important. These programs, some of which require remediation and non-credit courses, position applicants and enrollees outside of the general student population at the entry portal. Shapiro (2008), wrote “remedial programs tend to function as institutional gatekeepers, creating and preserving a distinction between students who are “deficient” and those who are not” (pg. 240). These programs serve two purposes. First, they broaden access to higher education. Perhaps more importantly, however, they serve an important enrollment management function by effectively increasing the student population without compromising the perception of institutional prestige or selectivity (Hossler et al., 2015). Websites help achieve this by making it clear that students admitted through these pathways are qualitatively different from those who are admitted through traditional admission programs.

On the Fitchburg State University website, for example, prospective students for their “Summer Bridge” program access the website by clicking a link under a heading that reads “Don’t Meet the Requirements?” (Fitchburg State University, 2020). Prospective students who have “shown the potential” but are “falling a little short” are invited to “explore Summer Bridge”. This language clearly communicates that students who enroll through this program are deficient in some way. A similar program
at the University of Rhode Island is described on their website as a program for students who come from “disadvantaged backgrounds”. The description goes on to say that admitted students have taken the required “core academic courses” during high school but, “the average academic profile for students accepted into the TD program is not the average academic profile for students accepted through the regular admission process” (University of Rhode Island, 2020). Like the FSU Summer Bridge Program, prospective applicants to the Talent Development program are situated outside of the “regular” or normal pool of applicants to the University. Westfield State University operates a similar program where “First-year students are accepted to the University on a conditional basis and must successfully complete the 5-week Summer Bridge Program and New Student Orientation to gain full matriculation” (Westfield State University, 2020). This harkens back to what Shapiro (2008) likened access programs for ESL students as “border control”, where such students are deemed deficient/different in some way and kept separated from the “normal” population or applicants and students.

**Belonging in Higher Education and Implications for Equity in Access**

In nearly 18 years as an admissions officer, I have worked nearly exclusively with students attempting to navigate pathways to higher education that were not built for them. Today’s campus communities are becoming increasingly diverse as unprecedented numbers of students of color, working class whites, and women are pursuing higher education. Gone are the days when straight, white males numerically dominated American college classrooms. Despite the fact that historically marginalized students now make up a significantly larger proportion of the student populations in higher education, they too often find themselves positioned as outsiders as they attempt to
navigate the complex network of pathways to college that were built by someone else for someone else. Colleges and universities genuinely want to increase the diversity in their campus communities. While the real motivation for doing so varies from school to school, virtually all public colleges and universities are investing in efforts to broaden access to their campuses to include more students from underserved populations. These efforts to create more diverse student communities are too often not accompanied by a real commitment to redefining who belongs in higher education. Colleges and universities depict dynamic and diverse campus communities where all academically prepared students can reap the benefits of membership in this exclusive place.

Unfortunately, some of the academic policies and the materials used to promote them situate many students outside of the mainstream citizens in the community. Whether by undervaluing academic and non-academic strengths of students or by limiting access to the full benefits of community membership to select parts of the population, institutions of higher education create clear definitions of who belongs in their communities and who is entitled to all the benefits of membership in that community. Sense of belonging has important ramifications not only for equity and access to higher education but also in retention and completion rates. Institutional admissions policies and promotional materials that position prospective students as outsiders or “aliens” at the entry portal to higher education unquestionably impact the ability of these students to feel like they belong in the campus community (Tinto, 1987; Shapiro, 2008). Closing both opportunity and achievement gaps in higher education will require both a redefinition of who “belongs” on campus and the construction of pathways
to and through college that affirm the strengths and value of historically marginalized students.

Redefining who “belongs” in higher education will require a broad commitment that is motivated by something other than protecting the fiscal health of individual institutions. The motivation has to be derived from a genuine commitment to equity in access to higher education and not a reaction to diminished tuition revenue. This is a complicated task as many of those with the most power to make real change in the system of higher education are those who have benefitted from a narrow definition of who “belongs” in higher education and who deserves the opportunity to pursue a 4-year college degree. Change will not happen until decisions are motivated by a desire to promote the “common good” rather than protect one’s own personal interests.

The process of redefining who belongs in higher education will require a philosophical shift away from the focus on the individual benefits of education toward a focus on the collective gains of broader participation in higher education. Rather than being concerned with the marketability of our own diplomas, we should be focused on the economic and social benefits of a highly educated citizenry. Colleges and universities can lead in this effort by not simply promoting diversity and inclusivity on their websites but building programs and policies that really create inclusive campus communities. This can be achieved, in part, by rethinking how we evaluate college readiness and placing greater emphasis on a student’s potential contributions to a campus community rather than near exclusive focus on individual academic accomplishments. Academic preparation matters and it is important to ensure that students have the requisite coursework to prepare them for the rigors of higher education. Unfortunately, the course
requirements that are typically used in evaluating academic readiness for college have evolved very little since the end of the 20th century despite significant changes in both higher education curriculum and the demographics of students who are applying to college. Colleges and universities that genuinely want to cultivate inclusive campus environments need to begin by better communicating that they value a broad range of “capital” (Yosso, 2005) that 21st century applicants possess.

Creating more welcoming and inclusive campus environments will also require changes in how colleges administer “merit” aid to students. Scholarship awards play a critically important role in making college more affordable and accessible. This is especially true for poor students who have historically not “belonged” in higher education. In his 2019 book *The Privileged Poor*, Anthony Abraham Jack wrote of the challenges that poor students face in navigating the foreign landscape at elite universities. He wrote of his own experiences and those of other students who battled feelings of isolation as they struggled to understand and use the codes and language in a community that was entirely foreign to them. The impact of poverty on the likelihood of success in higher education extends well beyond a student’s ability to pay a tuition bill. Too often it means that these students are outsiders in a community where access to all of the benefits of citizenship are not available to them. Merit awards and access to honors programs communicate to students that they are valued for their contributions to the campus community who are welcome to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship.

Like broadening access to higher education in general, creating new pathways to earn merit scholarships and places in honors programs will require a redefinition how colleges and universities assign value to potential contributions to the intellectual
community. Access to honors programs and eligibility for merit aid should be determined using a holistic approach that values a range of student strengths and “capital” and not simply grade point average and SAT score. Institutions that have adopted SAT optional policies for general admission but limit access to financial aid and specific academic programs are not truly ‘SAT optional.’ Eliminating standardized testing entirely and assigning value to a broad range of student “capital” will help create an environment in higher education where all students “belong”.

Websites and related promotional material are now the primary vehicle through which colleges and universities communicate with prospective students and their families. Pairing images of a beautifully diverse campus with descriptions of policies that marginalize poor students and students of color can reinforce the too prevalent notion that such students do not truly “belong” in higher education. Equity and access to higher education can only be achieved if these notions of belonging are not just repackaged, but completely redefined.
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MANUSCRIPT 2—Doing Well by Doing Good: How Admissions Officers Navigate the Business of Higher Education

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I think the most important part of being an admissions officer is to be that human, like that sense of humanity in the application process where sometimes an application can be so bounded by a test score or the transcript. – Randy

Introduction

Admissions officers have some of the most complex professional responsibilities in higher education. While a large proportion of their work involves selling a product or recruiting, they are also expected to be adept at counseling, evaluating academic potential, and planning events. When I started my first days as an admissions officer in July of 2005, I immediately gravitated toward the counseling elements of the job. I envisioned myself as having real power to make change in access to higher education. I entered my first recruitment season expecting to split my time between counseling students and making admissions decisions. I viewed my recruitment and counseling as essentially the same thing. I could be an effective recruiter by serving students and the community while simultaneously serving the interests of the college I worked for. My recruitment territory consisted exclusively of urban districts and most of the students I met were first-generation applicants from poor and working-class backgrounds. I visited schools, churches, community centers, and libraries and spoke of the benefits of earning a college degree. My work yielded an acceptable number of applications and I got great satisfaction out of helping students navigate their pathway to higher education regardless of where they chose to go. I was “doing well by doing good”. More than fifteen years later, the landscape of higher education has changed radically and my former approach to executing my job is now completely unfamiliar.
Today, competition for students is high and many public and less-selective private colleges and universities have been forced to recruit more aggressively to remain open for business. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this trend toward a more business-oriented approach to admissions as fewer students sought to enroll at 4-year colleges immediately after high school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Over 16 years, my recruitment territory grew from a relatively small number of schools in one state to include hundreds of schools throughout New England. My colleagues saw similar growth in their responsibilities and our team grew to include a “Data Manager” and a “Dean of Enrollment Management.” My success was no longer measured by the quality of my interactions with students but the volume of prospects that I was able to “yield” through my numerous school visits. I had transformed from an admissions counselor into a salesperson.

With the rapidly changing landscape of higher education, the role of the 21st century admissions officer is more demanding than ever. We are expected to be counselors, talent scouts, and skilled salespeople. Hossler et al., (2015), wrote of the centrality of sales and marketing skills in effective admissions work, “obviously, admissions officers and enrollment staff should be educated and trained in the field of marketing” (pg. 109). In the pages that follow, I use data I have collected through interviews with college admissions officers to illustrate the growing prominence of sales and marketing in their day-to-day responsibilities. I also argue that the more business-oriented approach to admissions work is perpetuating opportunity gaps in higher education and possibly narrowing pathways to college for historically underrepresented student populations.
Methodology

Participants in this study were admissions officers at public, 4-year colleges and universities in the northeastern United States. Using National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data, I identified institutions that met the following criteria:

- Public colleges or universities
- Competitive admission
- Awards 4-year degrees

Participation was solicited through the New England Association of College Admissions Counselors (NEACAC) listserve, the NEACAC Facebook group, direct email communication, and by distributing invitation letters at regional college fairs. See appendix B for examples of the solicitation letter. Interested parties completed a brief screening survey which addressed the following:

- Application caseload
- Years of experience in the field
- Race/Ethnicity of Admissions Officer
- Gender of Admissions Officer

This process yielded twenty-one participants.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

This study centered on the experiences of college admissions officers and how they understand their roles in shaping access to higher education. I sought to understand
how admissions officers view their experiences in evaluating college applications and interpreting and applying institutional directives that inform those decisions. As such, the primary source of data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014; Galletta & Cross, 2013; Seidman, 2015). The interview protocol was carefully crafted to guide the exchange between myself and participants while providing ample opportunity for participants to share as much of their understanding and perspective as possible (See Appendix A). Because the interviews were conducted in a single session, it was critical to allow a significant degree of latitude in participant responses to completely record their perspective. The semi-structured approach also provided a forum for an exchange between me as the researcher and the interviewee. Most importantly, this approach to the interviews allowed me to ask for clarification or greater detail as the interviews unfolded (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Kvale, 2008). There were numerous instances during the interview process where valuable insights emerged in conversations that followed initial responses to questions.

Throughout this study, recorded interview data were transcribed and coded. Interview recordings were transcribed soon after completion to allow for nearly immediate review of the raw data. Data analysis began with the creation of a secure digital file for each participant. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and interview transcripts, notes, and relevant memos were organized in a password-protected digital file. I began the initial review of the raw data by carefully reading each transcript without formally assigning any codes. This allowed me to make an initial review of the data and also confirm the accuracy of the transcription (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Saldana, 2011). During this process, I made some initial notes on the digital documents and
transferred notes that I had taken during the interviews to the completed transcripts. The process of organizing all of the documents related to data collection was a critical part of my analysis as it forced me to carefully and systematically consider what role each analytic memo or reflection might play in uncovering the story that would ultimately emerge from the data. During a second review of the data derived from the initial interviews, I was able to group text into more manageable categories of what Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) referred to as “relevant text”. As categories emerged from the raw interview data through this process of “open coding” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), I constructed a more refined set of categories and codes to organize the data.

I borrowed from the broad tenets of discourse analysis as a tool to systematically analyze this data and identify commonalities in how individual admissions officers respond to questions (Rogers, 2011; Talja, 1999). The initial round of open coding yielded 136 unique codes. After completing the second round of analysis with the clearly defined set of codes, I was able to narrow the original set to approximately 40-45 unique codes. At the conclusion of this round of coding I began to see a more distinct set of themes starting to emerge from the data. (SEE APPENDIX B). As is the nature of qualitative research, some of the unclear or redundant themes that I referenced in my interview notes became more meaningful after this second and then third review of the data. At the conclusion of this process I had identified six broad categories of codes that spanned a wide range of admissions officer experiences. In these codes and themes, it was clear that the marketization of higher education and the shift to a business-oriented approach to college admission influenced each of my participants and thus became the center of this manuscript.
The Evolving Role of Admissions Officers in the Market for Higher Education

The marketization of higher education is not just a 21st century phenomenon but coincided with the expansion of formal education in the United States throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Bok, 2013; Gupta, 2018; Hossler et al., 2015). Institutions of higher education that were originally founded to advance the “public good” have entered a competitive market for services where the relationship between colleges and prospective students is radically different than it was a generation ago (Bok, 2013; Dorn, 2017; Gupta, 2018; Hossler et al., 2015; Hurt, 2012.) In the marketplace for higher education, students are customers and treated as such. Declining public investment in higher education during the latter 20th century accelerated this marketization of higher education as funding sources shifted from public sources to the student consumer (Bok, 2013; Molesworth et al., 2010).

To some extent, students have always been customers seeking to find a place in an exclusive community. The first American colleges closely mirrored their European forebears in curriculum and, most importantly, in exclusivity (Beale, 2012; Broome, 1903; Thelin, 2011). Admissions requirements regulated who got the opportunity to attend the early colonial colleges and set the precedent for how these requirements would be used to define and protect pathways to higher education for generations to come. Early American colleges catered to the propertied elite and were able to survive by serving this relatively narrow segment of the population (Broome, 1903; Thelin, 2011). This exclusivity was a sustainable business model, in part, because early American colleges enjoyed generous subsidies from local governments and the English crown.
Thelin (2011), for example, wrote of how The College of William and Mary was founded and sustained by a significant cash bequest from King William himself in 1693.

The system of higher education in the United States grew significantly during the 19th century. The expansion of public primary and secondary education through “common schools” reflected a new focus on the public role of education (Dorn, 2017; Mondale & Patton, 2001). Prior to the Civil War, however, formal education remained the nearly exclusive domain of propertied whites. It was not until after Reconstruction that meaningful numbers of African American and other marginalized students gained access to K-12 education and educational access gaps began to narrow (Snyder, 1993). The growing public role of education extended to higher education with the 1862 Morrill Act which provided funding for land-grant colleges throughout the US. The Morrill Act was the most significant public investment in higher education in the history of the country and, with it, the number of publicly supported colleges and universities expanded rapidly. During the last three decades of the 19th century, enrollment in American colleges and universities rose from 62,839 in 1869 to 237,592 in 1900 (Bok, 2013; Dorn, 2017; Snyder, 1993).

Despite the Great Depression and two world wars, American higher education continued its expansion throughout the 20th century with another significant public investment from the Federal Government through the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944. (Dorn, 2017; Loss, 2012). The GI Bill, as it is more commonly known, included the most significant public investment in higher education in the history of the United States. St. John (2013) wrote of the enormous impact that the GI Bill had on the landscape of higher education as some 2.3 million returning servicemen entered college
and the percentage of Americans with college degrees rose by a factor of 5 between 1940 and 1950. The educational benefits of the GI Bill were promoted as a means to achieve greater equity in access to higher education by leveling the playing field and minimizing the financial barrier that prohibited many Americans from pursuing college.

Unfortunately, it had little impact on the myriad other impediments to higher education access and, as Katznelson (2005) argued, benefitted white males more than any other segment of society. Katznelson wrote, “despite the assistance that black soldiers received, there was no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill” (pg. 121). White males were able to travel well-worn pathways to college while women and black veterans had to contend with the same barriers to access to higher education that had preserved American higher education as a largely white male enterprise. The ability to pay for college mattered little if students were unable to gain entry to college.

Along with white males, colleges and universities were beneficiaries of the enormous public investment in higher education in the GI Bill. The number of American students enrolled in American colleges and universities continued to grow rapidly in the second half of the 20th century. According to Bok (2013), the percentage of American high school graduates who pursued postsecondary education increased from just 14% in 1940 to over 60% at the turn of the 21st century. Business remained steady as American high schools churned out unprecedented numbers of eager graduates who viewed higher education as a critical tool in their pursuit of upward social mobility. Growth in the number of high school graduates, coupled with an increasing number of career fields requiring some level of postsecondary education resulted in another 30% increase in

Increased demand for higher education did not necessarily lead to growth in enrollment at America’s 4-year colleges and universities. While the number of American students pursuing higher education increased steadily, so did the number of postsecondary options available to them (Bok, 2013; Hossler et al., 2015). Postsecondary enrollment continued to grow but these students were now dispersed throughout a rapidly growing system of both 2-year and 4-year institutions. The growing demand for higher education and annual increases in prospective applicants sustained the continued expansion of the number of degree-granting US colleges and universities with the number surpassing 6,500 in 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This growth in the number of student consumers came to a halt in 2012, however, and enrollments in 4-year colleges in the US dropped by 8% in the years between 2012 and 2018. Recent data released by the Common Application indicates even steeper declines in college applications in the Northeast region with numbers declining by 14% (St. Amour, 2020). After years of consistent growth in the number of US high school graduates, colleges and universities are now facing a very uncertain future.

The decreased number of potential “customers” posed a significant challenge to 4-year colleges that had grown increasingly reliant on tuition dollars as public investment in higher education decreased (Bok, 2013). Greater reliance on students for revenue, increased numbers of postsecondary institutions, and a smaller number of prospective “customers” has forced many colleges and universities to restructure how they operate in this increasingly competitive market for students. Quirk (2005) wrote of how the growth
in competition between institutions brought the position of “enrollment managers” to prominence in higher education with over ¾ of institutions hiring one by 2005. This is indicative of a change in how colleges and universities have invested in personnel in the face of increased competition amongst schools. Enrollment managers oversee a broad range of departments with the overarching goal of ensuring that there are enough sources of tuition revenue to sustain campus operations. Camille (2015) described the tension that exists between enrollment management priorities and the institutional missions to serve students:

Higher education’s purpose has evolved (or perhaps deteriorated) to that of being seen primarily as a private versus public benefit, providing individuals with a means to career opportunity and success, and the influence of commercialization and market forces has pushed colleges and universities down a path in pursuit of ever greater resource demands, which when coupled with the pursuit of greater prestige associated with institutional positioning in annual, ordinal rankings that dominate perceptions of institutional quality, result in ever increasing pressure on SEM professionals to meet elusive enrollment goals and objectives.

With these changes in both personnel and mission, admissions officers often face the challenge of cultivating relationships with prospective students in an environment dominated by enrollment managers attempting to “eat the competitor’s lunch” (Quirk, 2005).

**Marketing and the “Efficiency Paradigm”**

The decreasing numbers of students graduating from US high schools paired with the prolonged Covid 19 pandemic has placed unprecedented pressure on college admissions teams and budget offices to operate more efficiently and meet enrollment goals with fewer human and financial resources (Hossler et al., 2015; Quirk, 2005). A December 2020 National Student Clearinghouse report found that the number of students who entered college directly after high school graduation decreased by almost 22% over
the previous year (Causey et.al., 2021; St. Amour, 2020). Another survey yielded the even more concerning result that 40% of high school graduates were “likely” or “very likely” to not attend a 4-year college after graduation (Jaschik, 2020). Admissions officers now face the challenge of selling an increasingly expensive product to a narrowing customer base that is more and more uncertain that it is a worthwhile investment.

Shrinking prospect pools and increased competition has led to a significant shift in the day-to-day responsibilities of admissions officers. Several participants in this study noted a shift in their jobs in which a greater proportion of professional work is being dedicated to marketing and recruitment. Janet, an admissions officer from a mid-sized public college, spoke of how she has been forced to be more proactive in her outreach to students to meet her recruitment goals:

Since there are physically fewer prospective students and competition amongst the other institutions where students can pay in-state tuition will increase. This has influenced my work because I now have expectations of performing heightened levels of outreach. In other words, we have to actively seek students out and begin to build the foundation of a relationship rather than wait for them to come to us to begin that process.

Admissions officers are no longer able to rely on the more passive approaches to recruitment that sustained them in previous generations. School visits and college fairs remain staples of higher education recruitment but now represent just one part of a much broader, coordinated, marketing plan.

Another participant in this study, Karl, works for a mid-sized, public university near an urban center in New England. He also spoke of the ways that his outreach and communication has evolved in recent years to include a much broader range of recruitment tools:
Working with marketing…really has helped us out to work, you know, send out the appropriate communication plan, you know, whether for postal mail, to billboards, to attending college fairs that we know that we want to break into areas that we will need to. So it’s not just kind of, um, doing the same old, you know, program every year where it is actually a thought process.

In the above passage, Karl spoke of the diversification of the university’s outreach to prospective students. Perhaps most importantly, he spoke of broadening the scope of outreach to “break into areas that we will need to”. His university is investing in carefully crafted marketing campaigns that aim to expand the scope of their outreach into areas that will be important if they are to remain economically stable in coming years. Like Janet, Karl’s approach to recruitment and relationship building places a premium on maximizing efficiency. In partnering with their marketing departments, the admissions team can enhance the effectiveness of their recruitment campaigns and reach more prospective students. Billboards and targeted mail and electronic communications are used strategically to enhance the effectiveness of other forms of outreach such as the college fair or high school visit.

I also interviewed Randy, who manages the recruitment for a program that serves first-generation students of color at a state flagship university. He began his career in admissions just two years ago and has been fully immersed in the business of higher education since his first day on the job. His approach to recruitment is fueled by his commitment to expanding access to higher education. Randy leverages his comfort with a wide range of communication tools to maximize his contact with prospective students. He highlighted the variety in his approach, “whether it’s text message campaigns, whether it’s like chats, whether it’s video, like we have an option for you to connect with us at all points in time.” The use of social media and electronic communication allows admissions officers to deliver messaging to prospective students very efficiently without
significant additional cost. Randy also referenced the fact that admissions office operations are no longer limited to a set schedule of recruitment events, but admissions officers are expected to be essentially on-call throughout the recruitment season. Many colleges and universities have included chat functions on their websites to further expand their capacity to connect with prospective students.

Admissions officers are acutely aware of the competitive nature of the field, and this fuels their efforts to operate efficiently in the marketplace for students. Joseph, a sixteen-year veteran at a flagship university, reflected on how the relative scarcity of students has changed how he and his colleagues approach recruitment. He stated, “I think for a little bit we might have been dragging our feet, um, you know, and kind of losing ground to some immediate competition, but I think, you know, if not anything we’ve caught up and maybe even surpassed some of our competition.” Joseph takes a great deal of pride in the institution he works for. He is an alum, and this seems to energize his approach to recruitment. He is proud of advancements in campus infrastructure that have helped his college “stay in the game” as competition for students stiffened. Another element of remaining competitive is operating more efficiently and strategically as they recruit.

We’re kind of looking at possibly cutting down on high school visits, the lower, more unproductive ones. Rather than having someone out there for ten weeks straight, if we can get the job done in six or seven and cut back on some of the, “well just do the visit because you’re in the area and you have an opening”...cut back on some of those and we may have time to come up with a few more kind of grander, maybe more encompassing type of initiatives that might benefit a bigger, you know, cohort of students or a bigger population... So our role has basically become, you know, here’s the number, here’s our target, go at it.

Joseph’s approach to recruitment now favors efficiency over expanded outreach to individual schools. Just as a business might withdraw investments from unprofitable
territories, colleges and universities make decisions to reallocate resources based on their perceived return on investment. My first recruitment territory included Baltimore and Washington, DC. When the cost of my recruitment was greater than the revenue generated by tuition dollars from students in the area, we stopped visiting schools and college fairs in favor of mailings and digital marketing.

While the focus on efficiency and maximizing impact of limited resources is commonplace in the private sector, this practice could have the unintended consequence of limiting access to higher education for students who attend schools that may not yield a sufficient number of applications and enrollments to justify an investment in recruitment. The pursuit of cost-effectiveness and efficiency could further disadvantage students who attend schools in low-income districts that have historically sent small percentages of their graduates to 4-year colleges as they are not seen as worthwhile investments. This is a significant equity implication of the efficiency paradigm that so many of my informants reported was shaping their work as admissions officers.

The best example of this may be Kent (4-year Private) who spoke of how he uses school profiles and reports to inform his recruitment. He described a process whereby he parels down his recruitment by finding out what the percentage of students at schools are eligible for free or reduced lunch and what percentage of graduates attend 4-year colleges. This allows him to maximize the likelihood that he is going to connect with prospective students who attend well-resourced schools (and are thus, more likely to be admissible) who can afford to attend his college without straining the institution’s financial aid budget. In an era where more public colleges are adopting a business-oriented approach to recruitment that had previously been found exclusively at private
schools, this practice could further limit access to higher education for poor and working-class students who are not as likely to produce as much revenue as their wealthier counterparts in more affluent suburbs. The shift to a recruitment model where colleges seek to operate efficiently to maximize the impact of their recruitment budgets has transformed the role of students from scholars or counselees to customers.

“Customers and Counselees”

What are the implications of seeing students as customers in this new efficiency paradigm? In a recent interview, a dean of enrollment management expressed to me that, given the choice, he would prefer to hire marketing or business graduates to fill open admissions officer positions. This is a clear example of how institutional leadership views business and marketing skills as critically important to the effective operation of the admissions office. Research in the field of Strategic Enrollment Management informs this type of decision-making regarding admissions office personnel. Hossler et al., (2015) emphasized the need for admissions officers to be “educated and trained in the field of marketing” (pg. 109). The literature of Strategic Enrollment Management positions admissions officers more as the front-line sales force than counselors who play a role in shepherding students and their families through the process of applying to and selecting a college or university. Thus, one of the biggest challenges admissions officers face is negotiating interactions with students who are simultaneously understood as counselees and potential customers. This becomes especially problematic when admissions officers must balance their personal commitment to providing access to higher education and to fulfilling the business interests of the schools they work for. Admissions officers expressed this tension in various ways throughout this study.
In some cases, this was most evident in the recruitment phase where practical considerations over the likelihood that students from a particular school or region would enroll narrowed admissions officers’ opportunity to engage with prospects. Tim spoke of carefully crafting his recruitment strategy to ensure the greatest return on investment possible. He explained his approach as, “analytical in the sense of strategic, strategically planning travel so that you’re utilizing your time on the road, um, and you’re getting the most profit of being on the road without spending all your university budget.” Cost-effective recruitment meant narrowing the range of students that he was able to connect with during his recruitment visits. “Profit” in recruitment is initially measured by the number of prospective students that an admissions officer can connect with during a school visit or college fair. When the pursuit of efficiency leads admissions officers to exclude schools that might not be profitable in terms of prospects, this can have a significant impact on college access. When the approach to building relationships with students is governed by a concern with profit and efficiency, it is clear that admissions officers (and the institutions they represent) understand these prospects more as customers than counselees. Viewing prospective students as customers determines if and how these very important relationships between admissions officers and students begin and evolve. If a customer is unlikely to produce material gain for an institution, it is less likely that they will receive the same level of advising and attention as someone who is seen as more likely to make a purchase.

Karl echoed Tim’s statements about the challenge of broadening contact with students with finite human and financial resources. Karl believes that one of his most important roles is as an advocate for students and this is how he approaches building
relationships with prospects. He finds the focus on marketing efficiency particularly frustrating because it limits the amount of outreach and relationship building that he and his colleagues can do. He said, “I think the biggest challenge would be, you know, are there enough bodies in the office to, you know, attend the college fairs that we’re getting invited to or expand more opportunities to come visit on campus. I would say staffing seems to become a challenge because there’s obviously more opportunities to be out there recruiting”. Karl’s take on the scarcity of resources differs to some extent when compared to Tim’s. While Tim’s focus was on making sure that he did not exhaust his recruitment budget, Karl felt somewhat bound by the way institutional resources limited his reach. The business of admissions has admissions officers and their colleagues “trying to do more with less” and limiting the volume and quality of interactions with prospective students. Admissions officers like Karl find the imposition of recruitment policies and practices that position students as customers frustrating as they limit their ability to execute their role as counselors and advocates.

Donna (mid-sized, public) was able to reconcile these seemingly contradictory ends. She spoke of the importance of cultivating relationships as part of maximizing the productivity of her recruitment. In fact, Donna listed “creating relationships with the students and with the schools” as the most important responsibility of an admissions officer. While Donna spoke of the importance of her counseling relationships with prospective students, most of the relationship building she highlighted centered on broadening her recruitment reach and ensuring the efficient processing of applications. She explained:

Building those relationships with guidance counselors has allowed us to make that a bit smoother for students. It all spreads word of mouth amongst other guidance
counselors, schools we’ve never been to before, um, and just connecting with anyone really in the area, especially when we’re spreading out in terms of businesses to try and get more adult students, um, businesses that will send them to us for what they will pay, the tuition, being able to build those connections. It is really the most important thing.

Donna values the counseling connections that she builds with students but ultimately recognizes that her job performance is measured by the extent to which she can convert those relationships into completed applications and enrollments.

*Application Review: “Sorting Hats” or Decision Makers?*

While the prominence of modern business practices is most obviously apparent in recruitment and marketing, it is arguably more impactful in application review. Application review is the space where admissions officers feel the tension between their roles as student advocates and business agents most acutely. While all colleges and universities have unique identities and missions that inform how admissions officers evaluate applications, admissions decisions are not always based on academic merit or a student’s potential contributions to a campus community. Admissions officers are challenged to interpret and apply institutional admission requirements with the goal of creating a campus community that is both adequately prepared and large enough to sustain the financial health of the school. Recruitment efforts aim to yield as many of the right kind of applicants as possible to ensure that the number of admitted students is high enough to meet institutional enrollment goals. As I explained in the previous section, the pursuit of efficiency and cost-effectiveness in recruitment already limits the number of students who have access to admissions officers. This could potentially lead to fewer students from “unprofitable” schools and neighborhoods having the opportunity to apply to and enroll in colleges. Admissions officers then face another challenge in the application review phase as they are forced to navigate institutional admissions and
financial aid policies that disadvantage poor and working-class students in the interest of protecting revenue streams.

Nearly all the admissions officers I interviewed in this study listed evaluating a student’s potential to succeed academically and community building as the most important priorities in the application review process. Despite each institution in this study using similar criteria in evaluating “college readiness,” the way in which individual admissions officers interpreted and applied these guidelines situationally varied. Janet described the process as “making the most educated guess possible whether a student would be successful at our institution based on things like strength of curriculum, grade trends, quality of writing, school profile, and retention data”. Tim (4-year public university) shared Janet’s belief that part of his responsibility is to ensure that, “everyone’s on the academic same level...you want to make sure that all students can handle the coursework, they’re gonna matriculate the four years.” It was in application review that Tim and other admissions officers saw their roles as access agents and institutional business agents again converged. Tim’s view of the relationship between application review and retention seemed to center more on the institution than the student. “You don’t want students to just come and then fail out their freshmen year, that does the school no good at all”. Tim sees his role in application review as being directly tied to the interests of the college. Enrollment Management involves much more than enticing ever-increasing numbers of students to enroll. Retention is a critically important element and Tim believes that short-term gains achieved by increasing first-year enrollments become increasingly difficult to sustain if retention rates decline as a result of admitting underprepared students.
While Tim was concerned about how lower retention rates might impact the institution he worked for, Janet took a more student-centered stance in her critique of admission policy. Janet spoke of how her application review process has changed in this business environment and her discomfort with the fact that she may not be doing what is best for the applicant. She stated, “because of the increasing demographic challenges, I am more inclined to describe my role as more of a sorting hat”. Here she referenced institutional directives aimed at maximizing the number of students who are admitted and thus, able to enroll. The declining number of high school graduates in the region has forced colleges and universities to be more creative in how they evaluate applications and communicate with students. As a “sorting hat”, Janet does not simply render an admit or deny decision but considers students for a variety of alternative pathways to admission. One pathway required students who would have ordinarily been denied admission the opportunity to complete a two week “bridge program” to be formally admitted. Janet expressed ambivalence about this program. While she found the prospect of more students having the opportunity to attend college appealing, she felt that the institution was doing these students a disservice. She explained:

My own personal ethics tell me that a student who falls below a 2.0 GPA with a college-prep curriculum will probably not be successful here or any 4-year residential campus, anyway, in other words, to admit a student that falls below what I believe are lower-end admission requirements is likely setting them up for failure, so I do not advocate for that.

She also felt that it diminished her role in the application evaluation process because she was no longer the final decision maker for the applicants in her caseload. Janet relayed a conversation with a colleague who shared her belief that the college was doing students a disservice in an effort to boost its enrollment and solidify its budget.
She stated, “we discussed feeling as though the institution was looking for a way to make inadmissible students admissible, obviously for revenue and therefore stability, and there were serious ethical concerns about those students’ preparedness”. This statement illustrates the tension that admissions officers feel when their moral convictions are challenged by institutional policies. In this case, Janet felt that her role in counseling and evaluating students was being lessened in an institutional effort to raise revenue.

Connie found negotiating the realm between her role as a counselor and a salesperson particularly challenging while reviewing applications. She found viewing prospective students as customers or consumers especially difficult to reconcile with her student-centered approach to her admissions work. Connie spoke of instances where her institution’s positioning of students as customers conflicted with her ideas about how to best serve them. She stated:

For me, it was never just about enrollment. It was about retention and graduation and the worst thing that I could do would be to accept a kid who wasn’t prepared or I knew wouldn’t do well or fare well and then have them take out loans.

Connie’s concerns for the student’s academic and financial welfare ran counter to institutional priorities related to filling the incoming class. She spoke of how the criteria used to evaluate applications were fluid and subject to change based on where they were in terms of enrollment deposits. “We would start with a profile that we would start from and then, depending on where our deposits were, that profile might drop”. In short, students whose academic profiles would have excluded them from entry in October might be admitted later in the cycle if deposit numbers were trailing behind what was needed to reach institutional enrollment goals. This practice calls into question the validity and fairness of institutional admissions criteria. If the criteria used to determine eligibility for admission can move based on where the college’s enrollment numbers are, this indicates
that business interests are more important than a true evaluation of a student’s likelihood
to succeed. Connie found herself torn between making admissions decisions that she
believed were in the best interest of the student and her responsibilities to the college she
worked for.

Donna (mid-sized, public university) shared similar concerns over the risk of
viewing students as customers rather than students. When speaking about offering
admission to students whose academic performance positioned them outside of the range
of students who were typically admitted, Donna expressed a reluctance to admit the
student in the interest of protecting the college’s financial bottom line:

I personally wouldn’t push for it to meet the numbers if I felt like they weren’t
going to do well. Um, well it would help us to meet our yield numbers. It’s not
going to help retention in the long run. We do get a lot of pressure to hit our
numbers and spring we didn’t come in so great. And you can tell because as we
get closer to spring, those students who maybe would have been a deny back in
November, I’m still above the 2.0 but pretty close and we’re talking about weaker
students. Um, maybe, you know, they have, they have 2.1...that person is more
likely to get in the closer we get to this semester as we’re trying to hit numbers

Donna’s experience illustrates the tension between her genuine desire to serve the
best interests of students and her obligation to fulfill her roles as a sales agent for the
college. This approach is similar to what Janet referred to as “making inadmissible
students admissible” in an effort to ensure that they enroll an adequate number of
students to keep the institution open and financially solvent. Simultaneously viewing
students as potential members of the campus community and critical sources of revenue
complicates the work of admissions officers significantly.

One of the defining features of modern admissions work that accompanied (or
perhaps accelerated) the shift toward treating students more as consumers is the
prominence of data in decision making. Of course, the use of data to inform the
construction of recruitment strategies is not inherently bad for equity in access to higher education. Colleges can use this data to explore regional “geomarkets” and focus their recruitment efforts on districts and schools where they feel they are most likely to encounter “qualified” applicants. In some instances, however, the business interests of the institution can lead to decisions in both recruitment and application review that can limit opportunities for students. While academic “merit” is a primary factor in determining who is admitted to the colleges and universities in this study, practical financial concerns can also influence decision making.

Connie’s experience at a flagship state institution illustrates this well. Connie is a seasoned veteran of admissions with over 15 years of experience in the field and considers herself a stalwart advocate for students. She spoke of her experience with some of the tactics that her institution used to woo “profitable” students:

So his model is, um, he had a data analytics person and his model was really truly throwing money at the kids that were able to afford the most amount and who they potentially thought would come. So they would throw more money at a kid who was maybe like a 2.7 with like a 1000, let’s say from Jersey from a good section.

This “good section” is a euphemism for a part of the state where a higher percentage of students were able to afford to pay the higher tuition rate for out-of-state students. This example runs counter to the notion that colleges and universities reward academic merit with financial aid as a student with a 2.7 GPA and a 1000 SAT was considered unremarkable by her school. Gross (2015) explained the financial logic behind this type of institutional decision, “Ostensibly, the goal is to maximize the probability of a student enrolling by reducing the net price, while simultaneously minimizing the cost to the institution” (pg. 196). Offering an enhanced financial aid package to a student with minimal financial need increases their likelihood of enrolling
by lowering the net cost of attendance and drives up revenue because out-of-state students typically pay a higher tuition than in-state students. In the quote above, Connie described an instance where financial aid awards can be influenced more by institutional business interests than academic merit (Brooks, 2015; Quirk, 2005).

Connie and other participants spoke of the extent to which budgetary concerns influenced the recruitment and application review process. Out-of-state students were an important part of balancing the budget at her university—particularly out-of-state students from affluent school districts who could afford to pay higher tuition rates. Connie explained, “they wanted to support the mission of the flagship university, but in order to do that, we had to have like the full boat, $40,000 New Jersey kid coming in too.” Wealthy students who can afford to pay higher tuition costs effectively subsidize institutional investments and aid for students from less affluent backgrounds (Brooks, 2015; Lucido, 2015). As state funding for higher education has diminished in recent years, colleges and universities are forced to adjust their recruitment tactics in this way to “balance the books”. The programs and admission initiatives that fuel Connie’s passion for working with marginalized students are, in part, subsidized by the higher tuition rate paid by students from affluent out-of-state districts. Economically privileged students are particularly attractive to schools because they pay a higher rate and require little to no need-based financial assistance. In short, wealthy out-of-state students are generally better for business than students from less affluent backgrounds.

Kent, a representative from a private institution, also spoke of how recruitment efforts are shaped by financial concerns. Kent explained:

We don’t full-pay students to come or fully fund anyone. Like we always gap students in some capacity, so I’m really going to schools where students will have
the ability to come. So I’m mostly looking for high-achieving schools in affluent areas.

He described a process whereby he researched the median income for communities in his assigned recruitment territory and limited his outreach to schools and students who he believed could realistically afford to attend the school he represented. Poor students cannot afford to attend the school that Kent represents, and that reality informs how he recruits. While students in wealthier districts have the financial resources to fill gaps between the cost of attendance and available financial aid, poor students require a financial investment that the institution is unwilling or unable to make. This has important implications for equity in access to higher education if public colleges and universities shift their recruitment toward more affluent students and away from districts where students enjoy fewer financial resources.

**Poor Students are Bad for Business**

Viewing students as sources of revenue can significantly complicate the effort to increase campus diversity. While students of color are unquestionably assets to a campus community, poor and working-class students of color can pose challenges to an institution’s fiscal wellbeing. Working predominantly with poor and working-class students, Connie felt frustrated by the extent to which business concerns impacted her ability to fulfill what she viewed as her most important role as an admissions officer:

Higher ed is much more of a business even at the public-school end. Um, and so it was all revenue driven. And because low-income, first-gen kids don’t typically bring in a lot of income, they (the college) were hesitant to look at ways of eliminating barriers.

In the same way that recruitment practices and admissions requirements historically protected existing pathways to college for majority populations, they can serve to protect the institutional bottom line while maintaining the impression that access
to the school is fair and equitable (Camille, 2015; Guinier, 2015). Connie believed that
leadership at her institution desired a more diverse student body but not at the expense of
a healthy financial bottom line. A greater financial investment in recruiting and enrolling
poor and working-class students could prove fruitless if the institution is unwilling or
unable to provide enough aid to make it possible for the student to attend.

The notion that poor students were a bad business proposition came up multiple
times during my interviews. In some cases, institutional policies mirrored the moral
dilemmas that Oscar and Connie faced when thinking about their roles as both business
agents and access agents. The same philosophy that informed recruitment strategies that
favored recruitment in schools in affluent districts shaped institutional programs designed
to support low-income students. Connie found her role in selecting students for a
program that offered full-need scholarships to first-generation students of color to be
particularly challenging. One contributing factor was her awareness that the institution
was scrutinizing the finances. Connie related:

They’re taking out, they’re having financial aid, Pell Grants, um, support services
that are going into them. Um, but particularly with my population, they’re getting
full rides so that program costs millions and millions and millions of dollars.

Connie views this as a stressful moral dilemma as she works to serve her students
as an access agent while simultaneously protecting the business interests of the
institution. The tight scrutiny over the selection process for this program often meant
Connie enjoyed little flexibility in the criteria used to evaluate applicants and who was
admitted to the program. In this case, the cost of enrolling individual students was
weighed alongside academic merit and potential contributions to the campus community
when making admissions decisions.
Like Connie, Oscar struggles to reconcile the fact that his status as an “access agent” sometimes requires that he work within a system that he is very suspicious of. This situation harkens back to what Bell (1980) argued that the 1954 order to desegregate American schools would not have happened had it not simultaneously served the interests of powerful whites in the country. Bell explained:

I contend that the decision in Brown to break with the Court’s long-held position on these issues cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision’s value to whites, not simply those concerned with the immorality of racial inequality, but also those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow the abandonment of segregation (pg. 524).

When examined through the lens of Critical Race Theory, the Brown decision was as much an effort to advance the interest of powerful whites as it was a means to improve education for Black students in the United States (Bell, 1980; Dudziak, 1988). Oscar hears the echoes of Bell’s interpretation of the Brown decision as he observes the enthusiasm for campus diversity that most public colleges and universities express in their promotional materials and mission statements. Oscar said:

I’m very cynical. I mean, I’ve been in the industry for 10 years now and Hispanic, Latin X students have always been there. They’ve always been yearning for an opportunity, for better access to higher education, and I just don’t think that there was a focus on it because they didn’t need to. They didn’t need to focus (on Latin X students) … I think it’s a business interest and I think I’d be naive not to say that. And I think most places all over the nation now that never focused on multicultural recruitment just are doing this now because they know that we need to, we need to survive. So, I think the access part of it is like, like now as institutions of higher ed focusing on access...they’re doing it because, because of the money and its kinda, it’s kind of a shame.

Oscar’s cynicism is built on his belief that the commitment that many colleges and universities now have toward diversity and access for marginalized students coincided with their declining enrollment numbers. Oscar works within this system because he is committed to broadening higher education access for economically
disadvantaged students of color and this institutional commitment to diversity helps him achieve that end. He is, however, frustrated by the notion that the motivation for these initiatives is tied more to the fiscal health of the institution than genuine commitment to equity in access to higher education. Some might argue that if the desired goal is greater diversity in higher education, then the motivation for achieving that end is inconsequential. Like Oscar, I disagree with this sentiment. Constructing students as revenue sources rather than community members may lead to broader outreach to some prospective students but push others further to the margins of higher education. This is particularly evident when examining how business interests influence recruitment practices and financial aid programs.

Randy handles multicultural recruitment at a flagship university. He described an experience that illustrated how colleges and universities can use admissions criteria to justify excluding students who represent risky financial investments. He told the story of a pair of extremely high achieving students from New York City whose GPA placed them near the top of their graduating class. Unfortunately, this high achievement was not paired with high SAT scores and the students were denied admission to the university. Randy’s appeals to his supervisor were rebuffed because the student would not be eligible for merit scholarships due to his low SAT scores. Randy explained, “we could see that in their transcript and their application that they were like low-income students and that they mentioned that needing scholarships would be helpful in college”. The director justified the decision based on the belief that, without merit scholarships, the cost of attending the college would be prohibitively high and the students would not be able to attend anyway. Randy was understandably frustrated by this outcome. Despite
promoting a diverse campus community that was open to all qualified applicants, their business-oriented admissions practices hindered their efforts to really achieve this.

Randy’s experience illustrates the extent to which college access is tied as closely to one’s social class as it was at the dawn of higher education in America. Perhaps more importantly, this highlighted the extent to which admissions decisions are driven by factors outside of academic merit. The student described above was one of the highest achieving in her graduating class but was still unable to secure a place at a moderately selective university because the “merit” scholarships that would have made it possible to attend the university were tied to SAT scores. The history of higher education in the United States is replete with examples of students being excluded based on factors that were beyond their control. Race and social class continue to have a powerful influence on opportunity gaps in higher education two decades into the 21st century. While nearly all college mission statements include some reference to their commitment to diversity, and all admissions offices claim to employ nondiscriminatory admissions policies, poor students and students of color do not enjoy the same opportunity to enroll in college as their more affluent peers.

Public higher education should not operate like private business. When recruitment and admissions decisions are influenced by the likelihood that an institution will see a return on its financial investment, it is often poor students of color who are left outside of the institutional gates. Opportunity gaps in higher education will not close if colleges and universities allow their business interests to inform their admission policies. Poor students have been systematically excluded from participation in American higher education since Harvard opened its doors in 1636. The policies that explicitly excluded
students have been largely replaced by policies that more subtly achieve similar ends (Berg, 2010; Guinier, 2015). Admissions officers not recruiting in schools where high percentages of students are eligible for subsidized lunches is a perfect example of how what is a sound business decision can have a significant impact on shaping access to higher education. The rising cost of college paired with diminishing state and federal investment in financial aid has made entering and persisting in higher education as difficult as it has ever been for low income students.

When I started in admissions in 2005, the maximum Pell Grant award was $4,899 and the average cost of attending a 4-year college was $17,451. In the 2018-2019 academic year the maximum Pell award had risen to $6,095 while the average cost of attending a 4-year school had increased to $28,123 (NCES). The growing gap between public aid for higher education and the cost of attending college makes recruiting and enrolling poor students a less attractive financial option for enrollment management teams. The trend toward viewing students as sources of revenue rather than contributors to the campus community must be reversed in order for us to make meaningful gains in closing opportunity gaps in college access and graduation rates.
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MANUSCRIPT 3—Access Agents and Gatekeepers: How Admissions Officers Understand Their Roles in Application Review

To be submitted to *Journal of College Admission*

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Introduction

College admissions officers play a critically important role in shaping access to higher education. They fill various roles ranging from sales agents to academic counselors but one of their most important professional responsibilities related to access is evaluating college readiness. Even though many colleges and universities use remarkably similar criteria in evaluating college readiness, there is no universal agreement over what academic and non-academic factors best predict student success in higher education. Arnold et al. (2012) wrote of the myriad factors that influence a student’s likelihood of success in higher education and the immense challenge that admissions officers face in determining who gets into the schools they represent. Depending on the school they represent and the territory they are assigned, it is not uncommon for individual admissions officers to review 1000 or more applications each year. As millions of American students apply to higher education annually, the way that admissions officers approach application review has a profound impact on access to postsecondary opportunities. While colleges and universities generally publish what criteria they use in evaluating applications, what is less transparent is how individual admissions officers interpret and apply these criteria in making admissions decisions. In this article, I argue that admissions officers’ philosophical approach to their professional responsibilities has a powerful impact on access at their institutions and higher education in general. In their roles as “gatekeepers” or “access agents”, admissions officers make important decisions that ultimately shape the community at the colleges they represent. I will draw on data collected in a year-long, qualitative study of admissions officers to show how access agents understand and navigate their roles in this process.
Methodology

The aim of this study was to add to literature dealing with higher education access and to better understand how admissions officers view their role in shaping access to higher education. Since the central aim of this study was to examine this phenomenon as it is understood by admissions officers, I chose to conduct a qualitative study designed to uncover how admissions officer identities and perspectives inform decision making and ultimately shape individual campus communities. There is no shortage of scholarly inquiry into the numerous causes of inequity in access to higher education in the United States. Many of these studies focus broadly on structural or systemic factors that restrict access to college. These studies provided critical context for my investigation of the role of admissions officers in shaping access to higher education in the US. With this in mind, this qualitative study was rooted in narrative inquiry as a means to best collect and share the perspectives and experiences of admissions officers. Narrative research involves the collection and retelling of individual stories of personal experience. This requires that researchers understand the experiences of participants and carefully construct the context from which these stories emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2014).

Participants in this study were admissions officers at public, 4-year colleges and universities in the northeastern United States. Using National Center for Educational Statistic (NCES) data, I identified institutions that met the following criteria:

- Public colleges or universities
- Competitive admission
- Awards 4-year degrees
Participation was solicited through the New England Association of College Admissions Counselors (NEACAC) listserve, the NEACAC Facebook group, direct email communication, and by distributing invitation letters at regional college fairs. Interested parties completed a brief screening survey which addresses the following:

- Application caseload
- Years of experience in the field
- Race/Ethnicity of Admissions Officer
- Gender of Admissions Officer

This process yielded twenty-one participants.

**Data Collection**

This study centered on the experiences of college admissions officers and how they understand their roles in shaping access to higher education. I sought to understand how admissions officers view their experiences in evaluating college applications and interpreting and applying institutional directives that inform those decisions. As such, the primary source of data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014; Galletta & Cross, 2013; Seidman, 2015). The interview protocol was carefully crafted to guide the exchange between myself and participants while providing ample opportunity for participants to share as much of their understanding and perspective as possible (SEE APPENDIX A). Because the interviews were conducted in a single session, it was critical to allow a significant degree of latitude in participant responses to completely record their perspective. The semi-structured approach also provided a forum for an
exchange between me as the researcher and the interviewee. Most importantly, this approach to the interviews allowed me to ask for clarification or greater detail as the interviews unfolded (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Kvale, 2008). There were numerous instances during the interview process where valuable insights emerged in conversations that followed initial responses to questions.

Throughout this study, recorded interview data were transcribed and coded. Interview recordings were transcribed soon after completion to allow for nearly immediate review of the raw data. Data analysis began with the creation of a secure digital file for each participant. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and interview transcripts, notes, and relevant memos were organized in a password-protected digital file. I began the initial review of the raw data by carefully reading each transcript without formally assigning any codes. This allowed me to make an initial review of the data and also confirm the accuracy of the transcription (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Saldana, 2011). During this process, I made some initial notes on the digital documents and transferred notes that I had taken during the interviews to the completed transcripts. The process of organizing all of the documents related to data collection was a critical part of my analysis as it forced me to carefully and systematically consider what role each analytic memo or reflection might play in uncovering the story that would ultimately emerge from the data. During a second review of the data derived from the initial interviews, I was able to group text into more manageable categories of what Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) referred to as “relevant text”. As categories emerged from the raw interview data through this process of “open coding” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), I constructed a more refined set of categories and codes to organize the data.
I borrowed from the broad tenets of discourse analysis as a tool to systematically analyze this data and identify commonalities in how individual admissions officers respond to questions (Rogers, 2011; Talja, 1999). The initial round of open coding yielded 136 unique codes. After completing the second round of analysis with the clearly defined set of codes, I was able to narrow the original set to approximately 40-45 unique codes. At the conclusion of this round of coding I began to see a more distinct set of themes starting to emerge from the data (See Appendix D). As is the nature of qualitative research, some of the unclear or redundant themes that I referenced in my interview notes became more meaningful after this second and then third review of the data. At the conclusion of this process, I had identified six broad categories of codes that spanned a wide range of admissions officer experiences.

**Access Agents and Higher Education Access**

Over the course of eighteen months, I heard the stories of how admissions officers execute a very complex set of professional responsibilities. Their roles are unique as they are simultaneously acting as counselors, salespeople, and appraisers of academic potential. It is in the process of reviewing applications, however, that they arguably have the most power in shaping access to their institutions. Approaches to application review vary based on individual admissions officers and the criteria that an institution uses to evaluate eligibility to join the campus community (Beale, 2012; Thelin, 2011). The academic criteria used in evaluating applications varies surprisingly little across institutions with most requiring a similar set of courses in order to be deemed adequately prepared to succeed academically at the college level. Academic preparation is generally established through the completion of coursework in English, Mathematics, Natural
Science, Social Science, and Modern Languages. In addition to high school transcripts, most colleges require submission of an essay or personal statement, recommendation letters, and standardized test scores such as the SAT or ACT (Beale, 2012; Lucido, 2015). Admissions officers are charged with determining whether an applicant is academically prepared to succeed at the institution as well as making some determination of what contributions they would make in shaping the campus community. This is a complex process that is made more challenging by the additional responsibility of ensuring that not only are the applicants ready to succeed in college but there are enough of them to sustain the institution financially (Camille, 2015; Hossler et al., 2015). These responsibilities create a unique tension as admissions officers are sometimes forced to admit students who they believe are underprepared for college in the interest of protecting the financial bottom line, while other times forced to deny students who they feel would thrive on campus. These are the dual injustices that both “access agents” and “gatekeepers” perpetrate in their efforts to navigate their professional responsibilities. It is often difficult to balance a commitment to serving students well and fulfilling their commitments to the college they work for.

I categorize most of the participants in this study as “gatekeepers” because their approach to application review puts a great deal of faith in the institutional admissions criteria as an effective measure of college readiness. It is important to note that I do not use this term pejoratively when speaking of these admissions officers, rather, I believe it reflects their philosophy as it relates to their role in providing access at their schools. College admissions requirements are a gatekeeping mechanism, and these admissions officers are generally apt to defer to those guidelines when evaluating applications. At
my college, the courses required for admission in 2021 are virtually identical to those listed in the 1991-1992 college catalog. The only exception was that applicants in the early 1990’s were required to show evidence of computer literacy (Rhode Island College, 1992). These requirements have shaped the campus community for generations.

Soares (2012) referred to an “old regime mindset” (pg. 66) in reference to the impact that traditional measures of “college readiness” have on access to higher education. Soares argued that this approach to determining admissibility is a dated and unnecessarily narrow measure of college readiness that continues to shape access to selective colleges and universities. It is through their interpretation and application of these guidelines that gatekeepers act to preserve and protect established pathways to higher education. While there are others whom I call “access agents” who view admissions criteria as preserving a system that has historically excluded marginalized students, the gatekeepers in this study believed that such criteria serve as an effective means to help ensure that students who are offered admission are prepared to succeed and ultimately earn a degree. Gatekeepers view admissions criteria as a tool for reviewing applications efficiently and fairly. Evaluating each applicant based on the same criteria provides gatekeepers with some degree of comfort that they are executing their duties in a fair and equitable manner.

The defining feature of gatekeepers is their faith in the system. They acknowledge its flaws but generally believe that, by adhering to the protocols set forth by their institutions, they are able to serve both the applicant and the college well. Janet, who represents a 4-year public university in northern New England, explained her understanding of her college’s admissions criteria as follows:
I believe that the intended purpose of the admissions criteria is to prevent students from enrolling who are extremely likely, based on past habits, to not retain, not earn their degree and ultimately acquire debt anyway...Occasionally a student will squeak through who we initially would not have believed would be successful and surprise us, but most of the time we find that when we don’t stick by the established criteria because we want to take a chance on a student, and they enroll, we have to learn later on that they didn’t stay.

Janet believes that by following her institution’s admissions guidelines, she protects both the interests of the student by ensuring that they are well enough prepared to persist in a degree program and her college by avoiding admitting underprepared students and negatively impacting important measures of institutional quality such as 4-year graduation rates (Hossler et al., 2015). In her view, this is not about excluding students but protecting them. Gatekeepers made up the majority of admissions officers in this study and, while they provided valuable context to help me understand how admissions officers understand their roles in shaping higher education access, it was the access agents who I felt offered the most compelling descriptions of how critically important admissions officers were in the process. Access agents partner with students to navigate the well-worn pathways to higher education that are often littered with hazards and obstacles for those who are unfamiliar with the route. They also are adept at finding alternative routes through the gates when existing pathways prove too hazardous. Lastly, they courageously confront policies and practices that make the pathway to higher education more hazardous to traverse for some than others. This is their story.

Access Agents

Despite marked differences in how they approach their work, access agents share a great deal with their gatekeeping colleagues. First, they share an identical set of institutionally defined goals. They often share overlapping recruitment territories, and
they use the same admission criteria to guide their evaluation of applications. I would even argue that both access agents and gatekeepers share the same goal of expanding access to higher education for all students. The primary distinction between the two lies not in their beliefs in the importance of equal access to higher education but in how they view their role in achieving this. While gatekeepers generally believe that the system is fair and operating as it should be, access agents train a critical eye on policies and procedures that they view as protecting the status-quo in higher education. Access agents are sometimes frustrated by having to work within a system that they view as a large part of the cause for inequity that persists in higher education today.

When I started as an admissions officer in the summer of 2005, I saw myself as an access agent who would make a meaningful impact on broadening access to the school I work for. My colleagues admired my spirit and dedication but probably believed that this enthusiasm would be tempered by a system that had resisted change for much of its existence on the continent. I was naive. My understanding of higher education access was informed by my experiences as a straight, white, male from a reasonably well-funded high school. I knew that there was definite inequity in college attendance rates but believed that opportunity gaps were the product of poor instruction and guidance in secondary schools and not admissions policies and practices. It was not until I trained a critical eye on my own experiences that I understood that I had travelled a well-lit pathway to college that included clear directional signs and numerous welcome depots where I could get guidance from privileged travelers who had gone before me. It was only then that I had begun to learn the ways of the access agents.
In the fall of 2008, when I was three years into my career in college admissions, I had the opportunity to meet with “Maria,” an incredibly talented English Learner who had discouraged from attending my information session at her high school because she did not have 4 years of “college preparatory” English courses and thus could not be considered for admission to a 4-year college. I immediately recognized that this policy was an unfair hindrance to her and assured the student that I would speak to my supervisor and find a way for her application to be considered. I arrived back at our office and confidently approached my supervisor asking what the appropriate pathway was for an ESL student who had not completed the required “4-years of college preparatory English”. Her response was that the appropriate pathway involved attending the community college and applying as a transfer student. I was genuinely shocked by her response. How could it be that such an accomplished student would not be welcome at the college that branded itself as the “college of opportunity”? I then appealed to another colleague only to be rebuffed again. It was at that point that I began to understand what it meant to be an “access agent” in a system that often doggedly resisted change. Fueled by her commitment and persistence, I partnered with this student as we worked to build and navigate her pathway into the college. We ultimately found a way; four years later, she graduated with honors and is now completing a Ph.D. This experience not only affirmed my commitment to being an access agent but, more importantly, motivated me to work to change policies that I saw as impeding this work. Our policy related to the admissibility of talented bilingual students was the first target in a broader war to improve equity in access to the college where I was a graduate and an employee.
All access agents in my study are similarly motivated by a desire to broaden access for marginalized students, but how they approach this work varies situationally. Sometimes access agents work within the system by partnering with students to maneuver around obstacles, and other times they work to change policies and procedures that operate to exclude those students. In the case I described above, my initial effort to work within the existing policy framework proved fruitless so we opted to build a new pathway to admission for students like Maria. In the pages that follow, I describe the experiences that some access agents shared with me in surveys and interviews as they work with students to navigate a system that is extremely complex and resistant to change.

Access agents in this study exhibited a keen understanding of the inner workings of the system of higher education and how that system informed the admissions policies at their individual colleges and universities. With the goal of broadening access to higher education, these admissions officers worked with and for prospective students as they navigate pathways to higher education that are often unfamiliar to marginalized students or obscured from view by gatekeepers at the secondary and postsecondary level. Oscar works at a public 4-year regional university and describes his most important role as an access agent “is and should be to provide access and information to populations all over the nation and to make things, and to make things easier for people that want to attend an institution and to do that for everybody.” Oscar is a vocal critic of what he believes to be a system where gatekeeping has been the norm. He explained:

\[1\] It is important to note that if Maria’s admissions officer had been a gatekeeper, she likely would still have gone to college but her pathway to being a published author and Ph.D. candidate would have been unnecessarily longer and more expensive.
Well, I think higher education has always been about keeping people out and I think its just the philosophy of higher ed. It’s again, you’re talking to a very cynical person here, but, you know, higher ed. Admissions officers. I know I have very little admissions friends because, because of how I feel that they’re, it’s just a culture of, you know, I’m an admissions officer, I’m very important, um, I can keep you out.

Oscar’s belief that admissions officers should be working to create more pathways to higher education for all students runs counter to what he sees as a systematic effort to protect pathways for some at the expense of others. While some admissions officers use their power in admissions to protect the status-quo, Oscar believes that it is his responsibility to work to weaken the system that has historically favored privileged students. Oscar places blame for opportunity gaps in higher education on those who created the system rather than his colleagues who work within it. He explained:

The powers that be want to keep their advantages, subconsciously or consciously, they want to keep certain advantages out there...So if you think about the philosophy behind it and how higher education in 250 plus years has barely changed and it’s really designed to keep low, the middle class, low middle class people out, low income kids out...kids with disabilities out.

The “powers that be” refers to the architects of the system of exclusion as well as those who construct policies that preserve and protect it. When I pressed Oscar as to who he thought the “powers that be” were he responded succinctly, “upper middle-class white people”.

Access Agents and Application Review

Perhaps the most important factor that distinguishes access agents from their more conservative colleagues is in their approach to application review and how they interpret and apply institutional admission criteria. While gatekeepers measure “college readiness” by the extent to which an applicant meets a fixed set of admission criteria, access agents approach applications with an eye toward finding strengths and attributes
that provide evidence that a student would be a positive addition to the campus community. Writing in the Journal of College Admissions, Sommerfeld (2011) explained the importance of non-academic assets and experiences in influencing a student’s likelihood of success in college. She argued that traditional academic measures of college preparedness are often not as effective in predicting college success among marginalized students. Focusing on non-academic assets or “capital” (Yosso, 2005) can improve both the fairness of the admission process but also the likelihood that factors used in decision making accurately predict student success. Karl works for a mid-sized public university in the Northeast and takes this very holistic approach to each application he reviews. Despite strict state and institutional guidelines governing admission policies, Karl understands that “college readiness” cannot be measured through GPA and coursework alone and this informs his approach to application review. He understands the value of non-academic assets that are not easily measurable through an academic transcript. He references the role of non-academic factors in increasing the likelihood of success in college and takes that into account in his application review. He stated:

A student may not have a strong GPA but they are really involved in that activity. Could be a sports organization or like a college access program. Because when you run into maybe a wall, they know how to navigate a process, navigate a system or even ask for help because many students when they transition to college, um, they may feel a bit overwhelmed but I always see that a student who has been involved in some type of programming, in the high school level knows that there are individuals that will help them out…You know, there’s, you know, situations where students who have been involved in a club or activity, um, knowing that they’ve created leadership skills and know how to, how to really navigate, uh, the process.

In this passage, Karl speaks to how he values non-academic factors when making admissions decisions. This is certainly not unique to Karl specifically or access agents in
general but, what is important to note, is how prominently non-academic factors and “student stories” feature in his decision-making process. In Karl’s view, persistence and the ability to navigate the education system are critically important elements of college readiness. What is most remarkable about his approach is that he works in a space where admissions decisions are regulated not just by the institution he works for but the state governing body that oversees higher education. Karl’s use of professional discretion is limited to some extent by the fact that the state sets concrete guidelines for who may be admitted to 4-year public colleges. Despite this, Karl’s approach to application review focuses on identifying evidence of students’ college readiness rather than measuring them against a uniform standard of “college readiness”.

The creative approach that access agents take to application review is tied, in part, to their belief that their role involves much more than evaluating academic preparation. The community building element is important to access agents like Karl because students who have historically been excluded from higher education have not been represented in these spaces. Karl elaborated on his approach to application review in cases where a student struggled academically in high school:

How are they going to be an asset? So maybe a student put too much on their plate, their GPA is not trending exactly where we normally would accept. Um, but you know, how can the student be an asset to the institution? So that’s all we will use those activities, um, that would help a student, uh, to be successful.

Karl favors community “assets” over the perception of prestige that accompanies rigid adherence to strict admission criteria. Determining which students will be an “asset” to the institution is a complex process that requires the type of holistic review that Karl practices. He does not dismiss the importance of student academic performance,
rather he looks to achieve “balance” in his application review. This is the work of the access agent. Later in our interview, he explained:

   Maybe this student has been part of a leadership program that they have. They have a story to tell. Um, in that, you know, we’re not, we’re not penalizing them, you know, academically in the classroom, but knowing that they’ve done X,Y, and Z activity that’s going to demonstrate that they will be successful here at our institution.

   Karl fully recognizes that academic rigor at the secondary level is an important element in being prepared for college work but sees this as just one part of the review process. He believes that his role as an admissions officer is not simply confirming that a student meets a set of academic criteria but to make a determination if his institution is prepared to serve those students. Karl believes that an important part of his role in building a campus community involves ensuring that he is helping to broker relationships that are mutually beneficial. When talking about campus support infrastructure, Karl explained, “So knowing that if we are making the commitment to that student, we’re going to make sure that we’re prepared to serve the student um, that is not meeting our normal, you know, our normal admission standards”. Here Karl explains some of the philosophy underpinning his commitment to access. While a gatekeeping approach to application review justifies excluding a student based on the belief that they do not have the academic potential to succeed at the institution, Karl approaches application review by considering whether his college is equipped to help the student succeed (McNair et al., 2016). While gatekeepers believe that the institution’s admissions requirements are effective in ensuring that most admitted students are adequately prepared to succeed, Karl carefully considers whether or not his institution is prepared to serve each student. This is a critically important part of his philosophy as an access agent. Oscar echoed Karl’s
belief that it is as important for colleges to be student-ready as it is for students to have
the necessary academic background to succeed in higher education. Oscar stated:

It's also the responsibility of the institution to provide services. I think we talk a
lot about college readiness and admissions, higher ed. in general, so that they can
avoid putting money into student supports and, and, training…I think there’s that,
but it’s really hard to define because I think the word college readiness has been
used in an oppressive manner. So it’s like a way of, a lazy way of saying this kid
isn’t ready for college, but, like, who is? Who is?

Oscar takes exception to the fact that some of his colleagues place blame for
academic failure exclusively on the student and do not consider the responsibility of the
college or university to create a campus environment with adequate support for all
students (Archer et al., 2003; Guinier, 2015; Patton, 2016). When asked why colleges
and universities did not invest in an environment that was more universally “student
ready” (McNair et al., 2016), Oscar explained that he believed that these institutions
valued diversity as a marketing tool but were generally unwilling to invest in creating
campus environments designed for all students to thrive.

Another way to frame the access agent approach to application review involves
viewing a student’s academic performance in the context of their overall lived
experiences. Rather than measuring each student against a uniform set of criteria, access
agents consider a student’s performance relative to those criteria as part of a larger story.
Context matters to access agents. In a system where some students enjoy an unobstructed
pathway to higher education, access agents seek to gain an understanding of how the
lived experiences of students impact their college applications. While a gatekeeper might
focus on the overall prestige or “competitiveness” of a high school when making
admissions decisions, access agents seek to understand how individual experiences may
make an applicant a stronger contributor to the campus community. Karl explained, “I
wouldn’t want to penalize the student based on the high school or the neighborhood that they ended up growing up in”. Karl recognizes that educational opportunity is often tied to circumstances that are beyond a student’s control and he considers this in the application review process. Students who attend schools with a wide range of honors and Advanced Placement course offerings have a distinct advantage in the college admission process. Karl and other access agents resist a system that they believe often unfairly disadvantaged students based on the circumstances of their birth.

Oscar has a similar philosophy of how to equitably review applications to his institution. He has a set of parameters that he must operate within, but he is careful to consider context when he evaluates each student. Oscar looks beyond the academic record and tries to understand the circumstances and experiences that have shaped an applicant’s education. Oscar considers the totality of a student’s experiences and tries to view their academic records in the context of those lived experiences. His focus is on equity, a term that he does not use lightly, as it informs his entire approach to application review. Oscar spoke about his focus on fairness and equity in admissions work:

At the application when reading starts becoming really heavy, we’re going to have lots of conversations about reading through an equitable lens. Um, because, in my understanding, people look at things very different that don’t have that lens. So one of the big things that I’ve noticed is that like my institution will place focus, a lot of focus on student involvement in high school…but when you look at kids from underrepresented areas, kids might not have the opportunities to do that because they might be babysitting after school, they might have to work. So, kind of rethinking certain, how we look at certain things.

Oscar understands that educational opportunity is not distributed evenly and reviewing applications through an “equitable lens” means keeping this at the forefront of his mind throughout the process. He believes that he is in the minority of admissions
officers who take this kind of intentional, equity-focused approach to application review and this motivates him as he engages prospective students. He explained:

For some people in my office, without seeing that kid’s SAT score, the kid probably won’t get admitted. So because they’re going to want to see, you know, at least a thousand probably on the SATs. Uh, in my case, I’m looking for other factors, then I might call for an interview. Um, but some people would just, blankly deny the kid.

Oscar explained how his focus on equity and fairness shapes his approach to each application. In the above passage, Oscar describes how his commitment to equity drives him to look beyond transcripts and test scores to find evidence of “college readiness” that might be ignored by his gatekeeping colleagues.

Access agents like Oscar and Karl face the challenge of operating in a system that was essentially built by and for gatekeepers. They both take an equity-oriented approach to application review in a system where they are bound by state and institutional admission criteria that often limits their ability to make decisions that they see as advancing access to higher education for marginalized students. Oscar is often frustrated by the extent to which the academic criteria he is forced to use in evaluating applications limits his power to serve students who have been made underdogs by the system:

I read in areas where the, the high density of low-income kids and students of color, and so I’m looking at them, I’m looking at their, their life. I’m trying to judge their life on, based on, this and their potential and so I think looking at things through an equitable manner, it’s looking at things through potential and through understanding, you know, different socioeconomics, social, political factors in the world that we live in today and in education. So, like if I get a kid from let’s say Charter Preparatory (made up name), um, with a 78 GPA… I might read the essay and in the essay I might find out, which happens a lot, I might find out that this kid witnessed gun violence to one of his friends, one of his friends got murdered. Or I might find out that, um, it’s a single parent household and mom works night shift and this kid is coming home every day cooking for his siblings and doing homework and then on weekends they are doing a part-time job. So there are factors and you know, these are factors versus a kid in a different area who might have all this extra time to do work, might have ample opportunities, might not have to worry about where his next meal is gonna come
from. So the, you have to be able to really take it, take that into account and higher ed., the admissions process, the reading process, you could be at a HBCU and it’s still a white space because it’s looking at things to the traditional standards, to the standards that we’ve made over the years that have created barriers for centuries. So I think, yeah, I think looking at things with equity matters, just taking your time and looking at the big picture and the potential.

While many admissions officers use institutional admissions criteria as the benchmark by which academic potential and “college readiness” are measured, access agents like Oscar see evidence of potential in places that are often ignored by his peers. He spoke about how “white spaces” are created and protected by “traditional standards” that undervalue some of the capital that these marginalized students often bring to the table. Oscar approaches each application with a focus on equity that requires that he assign the appropriate value to these strengths and assets. His focus is on determining a student’s potential based on the totality of their lived experiences rather than what is contained in their academic transcript.

As I mentioned previously, many access agents view the system as the enemy. Their work in eliminating barriers or helping students maneuver around them is complicated by a system of exclusion that has proven extremely difficult to change. Like Oscar and Karl, Connie found her work complicated by a system of education that positioned large parts of the student population as outsiders. She stated:

Once I got more experienced and understood my schools more and my population more, then I really created all of the guidelines and all of the goals and targeted different areas and then I saw where there were huge holes and huge holes systematically, you know, and so how do I help to, to fix that or help because I saw so much disparity between even where I was living or am living and where I was working and this educational system and the lack of resources and um, really the lack of foundation that so many of my students weren’t getting when they were in high school, you know?

Connie shared Oscar and Karl’s concern over the “student-readiness” of her institution and struggled as she reviewed applications from students who attended poorly
resourced secondary schools when she was not entirely confident that her institution was equipped to serve them well. Connie experienced considerable tension in her role as an access agent as she attempted to reconcile her commitment to providing access with very real concerns that her students might be forced to navigate an entirely unfamiliar terrain without adequate support. When I asked her what her greatest concern for these students who had been disadvantaged by the education system, she replied:

Having anything, that cultural knowledge, right? That cultural competency really, right? Like understanding how the whole process works. Like, what is a bursar? Where do I go for financial aid? Can I take out loans? Um, I don’t belong here, right? I can’t do this...So, and then I see the kids that I’m working with though and some of them are working 40 hours just to keep the lights on in high school. So how is that kid supposed to navigate this process that, you know, middle class, upper-middle class, or even higher, higher people with, because they’re still confused and they’re professionals?

Access agents are burdened by the realization that, despite their best intentions, they are often fighting the tide in their efforts to reshape their campus communities. While gatekeepers enjoy some degree of comfort in yielding a large portion of the decision-making process to the admissions guidelines, access agents struggle with the notion that the guidelines do, to some extent, ensure that the students who “belong” are the ones that get in. Access agents seek to redefine who “belongs” in the community and who is “college ready” and this contributes to the aforementioned tension as they question whether or not they are setting their students up to fail. Connie described some of her work as “exhausting” as she tried to balance doing the right thing for her students while simultaneously trying to seek institutional support for the work she was doing.

*Gatekeepers at the Gates*

Like access agents, gatekeepers generally approach each application aiming to offer a student admission. And while their philosophy differed from that of the access
agents per my discussion above, it is also important to note that advocating and even fighting for students is not done exclusively by access agents. Gatekeepers in this study frequently referenced times where they advocated for exceptions to be made for students they believed had the potential to succeed. The most important distinction lies in how gatekeepers and access agents approach advocacy. John is a seasoned veteran admissions officer who represents a large state university in New England. While John has unquestionably fought for students over the course of his long tenure in higher education, he is very selective in choosing which students he advocates for. John typically limits his advocacy to students who are reasonably close to meeting the college’s published admissions criteria. Oscar, on the other hand, believes that admissions criteria have historically hindered access to higher education and unnecessarily excluded students who are very capable of success at the college level. Oscar's more holistic approach to application review is an important element of his toolkit as an access agent.

Either of these approaches can be flawed. Sometimes admissions officers get it wrong. I think of myself as an access agent, and, like all admissions officers, I have made decisions that ultimately were wrong for the students I was attempting to serve. In one case, I fought to admit a student whom gatekeeping colleagues believed was poorly prepared to succeed in higher education. I conceded that, based on his academic record, they were right but to not consider all of the factors that influenced his academic record was plainly unfair. I brought his case to committee review and made the argument that had he not had to battle through a set of exceedingly difficult personal problems, his grades would be substantially higher, and he would easily be admitted. After what felt like days of impassioned debate, my colleagues relented, and the student was admitted
for the fall semester. During that fall semester, the student accrued exactly zero college credits and an approximately $3,000 debt. In my effort to help this student, I did considerable harm both financially and emotionally. This experience did not, however, make me question my commitment to living as an access agent. Access agents are critically important to any effort to achieve equity in access to higher education because they work to resist the systems and policies that have historically excluded students. I failed this student. Oscar, Connie, and Karl have all failed in similar ways but their commitment to creating pathways to higher education has opened doors for countless others. This is why the most important change in access to higher education will be led by Oscar and the access agents.

Simply put, we need more access agents who are willing to challenge a system that is designed to protect and preserve pathways to higher education that favor privileged students. Unfortunately, access agents are too often pigeonholed as “diversity specialists” or “multicultural recruiters” who work with a very narrow segment of an individual school’s applicant pool. The field of admissions is generally inhospitable to those who seek to radically change how pathways to college are built and who gets to travel those roads is determined. Oscar, for example, became so frustrated with the slow pace of progress in higher education that he left admissions to pursue a position where he felt he could be a more powerful advocate for students. Rebuilding a system that is doggedly resistant to change will begin by building a culture where access agents like Oscar are the leaders who are shaping admissions policies.

The first precondition in creating an access-oriented culture in college admissions is to bridge the significant gap between college mission statements and admissions
policies and practices. As mentioned previously, both access agents and gatekeepers share similar goals in broadening access to higher education. The distinction lies in the fact that gatekeepers see admission policies as advancing the goals set forth in institutional mission statements while access agents see a vast disconnect between goals of increasing diversity and the admission policies used to achieve those ends. Inclusive campus communities are not built using the same or similar practices to those that have historically protected narrow pathways to higher education. Access agents need to be at the forefront of a movement to expose biased policies and practices that are obscured institutional statements proclaiming commitments to equity and diversity.

Second, admissions professionals and the institutions they work for need to make a genuine investment in building a culture where commitment to equity is the norm. This will be achieved through professional development that centers on building cultural competence rather than sales skills and event planning. These professional development opportunities exist but are generally not featured prominently in large-scale conferences sponsored by national or regional admissions organizations. Colleges and universities need to invest in educating those who are making critical recruitment and admissions decisions to do so through what Oscar referred to as an “equitable lens”. All of the admissions officers that I interviewed in this study believed that equity in access to higher education was critically important. It was the access agents exclusively, however, who recognized that the current system prohibits us from achieving this.

Finally, colleges and universities need to adopt hiring practices that create teams of equity-oriented admissions officers. Initial admissions officer hires too often center on an applicant's willingness and ability to execute the required recruitment duties. While
the ability to speak Spanish and some level of recruitment or sales experience are preferred, new admissions officers often have very little experience or education that would make them well suited to become access agents. Hiring access agents will require a redefinition of what it means to be an admissions officer. Rather than focusing on an earned degree and willingness to execute recruitment duties, hiring teams should target candidates who can articulate a real commitment to upsetting the status quo. This will require some degree of courage as hiring managers are challenged to recruit people who are critics of the community they are about to join. Building teams of creative critical thinkers who are trained in social science rather than marketing will be an important step in redefining the role of admissions officers in shaping higher education access.
References


Appendix A—Interview Protocol

BRIAN STEVENS DISSERTATION PROJECT

interview questions

Individual Background/Context

1. Please describe your path to becoming an admissions officer.
   a. Where did you attend college? Describe your process of applying to and being accepted to college.

2. Describe the college you work for.
   a. What are the enrollment goals?
   b. What are its greatest challenges and how do these influence your work as an admissions officer?

3. How would you describe the role of admissions officers at the college or university where you work?

4. What do you believe is the most important role of a college admissions officer?

Second Phase- Operations/Doing the job

1. Walk me through your specific process of reviewing an application. Please be as detailed as possible.

2. Describe the criteria your institution uses to evaluate applications and determine who becomes part of the campus community.
   a. Describe how you use these criteria in evaluating college applications.

3. How would you define “college readiness”?
   a. What personal and academic assets are important in determining if a student is prepared to succeed in college? (What does it mean to be successful in college?)

4. Of the criteria that you use in evaluating applications, which do you feel are most important? Please describe why.
   a. What do you believe is the intended purpose of your college’s admissions requirements?
   b. Tell me about how well you believe these admissions criteria and processes achieve their intended goals/purpose.
5. Tell me about a time when your personal belief about a student’s potential didn’t align with your college’s stated admissions requirements.
   a. What did you do? What was the outcome?
   b. Tell me more about how you navigated this process with various interested parties (supervisors/administrators)

6. Tell me about a particularly tough decision you made on an applicant who did not meet your institution’s published admission criteria.
   a. Describe how you use professional discretion in such cases and how you communicate your thinking on this process/decision to colleagues and supervisors.

7. Tell me about your institution's efforts/mission to enroll a diverse class of students.
   a. What impact (if any) do you believe the college/university’s admissions requirements have on this effort?
Appendix B—Solicitation Letter

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral research in the URI/Rhode Island College Education PhD program. I am conducting this research in cooperation with Dr. Lesley Bogad, Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Rhode Island College.

The purpose of this study is to examine how admissions officers understand their role in shaping access to higher education through their approach to evaluating applications. You are eligible to participate in this study if you meet the following criteria:

1. You are a full-time admissions officer at a 4-year public college or university.
2. You review applications and make admissions decisions as part of your professional responsibilities.
3. You have worked as an admissions officer for at least one full year.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief screening survey which will require approximately 10 minutes of your time. If selected to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete one interview that will be approximately 120 minutes in duration. Finally, at the conclusion of the study you will be asked to review my written presentation of your interview responses. This will require approximately 60 minutes of your time. All of your survey and interview responses will remain confidential throughout the study.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to answer part or all of any question during the interview and you may choose to discontinue your participation at any point during the study. Please feel free to contact me at bstevens@ric.edu or 401-533-0011 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Brian Stevens
### Appendix C—“Code book”

**YELLOW = Holding for further review**

**GREEN = Keeping Code**

**RED = Eliminate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeper</td>
<td>Gatekeeper/Access Agents/Policy to some extent- interpretation of policy</td>
<td>Abiding by rules. Applies established criteria when reviewing applications. Faith in the effectiveness of those criteria in defining &quot;college readiness&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Identity/Gatekeeper/Access Agent</td>
<td>AO Identity- how does this inform decision making and interpretation of policy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Identity</td>
<td>Business/Marketing</td>
<td>How the school positions itself in the market for students? Looking beyond mission statements and considering who the school sees as its &quot;bread and butter&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Gatekeeper/Access Agents</td>
<td>Extent to which AO feels empowered to make decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Extent to which AO feels that process of making decisions is &quot;fair&quot;. Interpretation of fairness/definition seems to vary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Policy/Gatekeeper/Access Agents</td>
<td>Does the AO feel powerful in their position? What do they do with that power? What do they see as the role of that power in shaping access?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>REDUNDANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerless</td>
<td></td>
<td>Link with &quot;Power&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Marketing</td>
<td>Business/Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>Passages that deal with the prominence of sales in the admissions job. Includes collaboration with marketing departments and how institutional policies inform recruitment policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gate tending</td>
<td></td>
<td>ELIMINATE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Success</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship between students meeting entry requirements and actual success in college.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td></td>
<td>ELIMINATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undervalued</td>
<td>Gatekeeping/Access Agents</td>
<td>Assets and skills outside of the &quot;admission requirements&quot; that are typically not formally valued. Yosso/Community Cultural Wealth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investment in Students</td>
<td>Gatekeeping/Access Agents</td>
<td>Pair with &quot;student success&quot;</td>
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<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Gatekeeping/Access Agents</td>
<td>AO Sometimes see their roles as counselors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Success</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Support</td>
<td></td>
<td>Link with notion of &quot;student ready&quot; colleges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of College</td>
<td></td>
<td>How AO define the purpose of higher education. Why is this important? Why does access matter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
<td>Essentially same as above-eliminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathway construction</td>
<td>Access Agents/Gatekeeper/Policy</td>
<td>&quot;Access Agent&quot; - how admissions officers view their role in promoting access to college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Policies and procedures that aim to speed the pace/efficiency of the process. Cost effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment goals</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>What are the goals/directives delivered by campus leadership? How do goals influence behavior of AO?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Higher education is a business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelming</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strains associated with balancing job responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdens</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing Well By Doing Good (DWDG)</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management/Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Serving students/equity in access benefits the institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Personal ethics that inform how to approach their professional responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to stray from admissions guidelines when making decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Working against policy/procedures when AO believes it is necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>Access Agent/Gatekeeper</td>
<td>Perception that access to higher education is &quot;earned&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Valuing Students</strong></td>
<td><strong>How AO identity shapes how they perform professional responsibilities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer/Counselee</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access Agent/Gatekeeper</strong></td>
<td><strong>How AO view relationship building with prospective students</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profit</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategic Enrollment Management/Business/Efficiency</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tied to efficiency paradigm.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mentoring</strong></td>
<td><strong>Customer versus Counselee</strong></td>
<td><strong>Really mean counseling- eliminate in second run.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access</strong></td>
<td><strong>Policy/ Access Agents/Gatekeepers</strong></td>
<td><strong>AO working to broaden access to higher education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creativity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access Agents/Gatekeepers/Policy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Also &quot;professional discretion&quot;- how much can this be exercised in decision making?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexibility</strong></td>
<td><strong>See- Professional discretion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access Agents/Gatekeepers/Policy</strong></td>
<td><strong>AO efforts/focus on shaping campus community- influence on decision making</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competing priorities</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access Agents/Gatekeepers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Varied job responsibilities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defining belonging</strong></td>
<td><strong>Policy</strong></td>
<td><strong>How colleges communicate who belongs in community- WEBSITES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sales</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategic Enrollment Management</strong></td>
<td><strong>Part of AO job is sales.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marketing communication</strong></td>
<td><strong>Business</strong></td>
<td><strong>AO deliver messaging crafted by institution</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multitasking</strong></td>
<td><strong>Business/Efficiency</strong></td>
<td><strong>Varied job responsibilities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>service/customer service</strong></td>
<td><strong>Business</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sales orientation of admissions today. Karl especially.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>conflict</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access Agent/Gatekeeper</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conflict between wanting to offer access and being bound by institutional requirements and policies.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>college readiness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Access Agent/Gatekeeper</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tied to both the admissions requirements and the AO interpretation of those standards. Different from actual preparation for success in college. This is hard to define and even seasoned AO have some difficulty describing precisely what this means. Could be used as justification for exclusion for students who sit outside of the bounds of readiness.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>motivation</strong></td>
<td>&quot;College Readiness&quot;</td>
<td><strong>Asset: drives pursuit of education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resilience</strong></td>
<td>&quot;College Readiness&quot;</td>
<td><strong>Valuing student resilience in application review process. Looking beyond the 18 units- generally Access Agents value this as part of review.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time management</td>
<td>Eliminate and combine with this section.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community building</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management/ AO Discretion</td>
<td>Role of AO - not just evaluating &quot;college readiness&quot; but also building a campus community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>navigational capital</td>
<td>&quot;College Readiness&quot;</td>
<td>Navigating systems - impact on higher education access BUT also valued asset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asset to institution</td>
<td>&quot;College Readiness&quot;</td>
<td>Who is valued?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commitment to students</td>
<td>Access Agents</td>
<td>Prioritizing student outcomes in admissions work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diversity</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Too broad to be useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interest rating</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Data collection by colleges to inform communication with prospective students AND can influence decisions. Likely better folded in with business theme in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>College campus communities - how built?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guests</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aliens</td>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Students who are positioned as outsiders by institutional policies or the system of higher education in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community/business goals</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Doing well by doing good-building community = good business outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simplicity and efficiency</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Efficiency paradigm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anxiety</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Tension AO feel in executing duties - particularly when tied to assisting students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exclusivity</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management/ Business</td>
<td>Perception that school is difficulty to get into...demand exceeds seats available - rankings...marketing tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student voices</td>
<td>&quot;College Readiness&quot;</td>
<td>How are student voices heard in the admissions process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standardization</td>
<td>Efficiency Paradigm/Policy/Systems</td>
<td>Linked with business and &quot;efficiency paradigm&quot; - by standardizing procedures offices can minimize time invested in recruiting and application review AND minimize investments in training/professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conflict and tension</td>
<td>Access Agents/Systems</td>
<td>AO feeling conflicted when decision making and recruiting. Especially in cases where AO struggles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with fulfilling responsibility to institution at same time as supporting students. Internal- NOT actual conflict with leadership or individuals

| Obligation to community | Access Agent | Schools have an obligation to the community that hosts them. Informs AO work.
| --- | --- | --- |
| Equity | Eliminate- too broad | AO focusing on likelihood of "success" at the schools they work for. This is different from evaluating academic credentials against institutional admissions guidelines.
| Evaluating potential | Access Agents/Gatekeepers/Policy | Referencing student appearance in marketing materials. Only used by one participant.
| Abercrombie and Fitch | Eliminate | Decisions/policy initiatives are not in the hands of AO but administration
| Administrative power | Policy/Gatekeepers | Field of study that focuses on the business of higher education and informs many policy decisions.
| Strategic Enrollment management | Business | Admissions officers are conscious of their roles as business agents and that they have to be stewards of the AO budget.
| Racism | | Campuses with diverse student bodies have an easier time recruiting more diversity. Some wave the white flag...
| Classism | | Only in Connie and Joseph-particularly Joseph. Distinguishing between the perspectives of seasoned veterans and AO with fewer years of experience.
| Diversity breeds diversity | | Strict adherence to admission guidelines.
| Experience | Eliminate | Admissions officers are conscious of their roles as business agents and that they have to be stewards of the AO budget.
| Rigidity | Gatekeeper | Efficiency paradigm- making the most out of resources by leveraging technology in communicating with students. More prominent in the days of Covid.
| Return on investment | Business | Focus on maximizing efficiency/profit.
| Technology and efficiency | Eliminate | Efficiency paradigm- making the most out of resources by leveraging technology in communicating with students. More prominent in the days of Covid.
| Efficiency paradigm | Business | Focus on maximizing efficiency/profit.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>casting a wide net</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Broad recruitment in an effort to meet enrollment goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;bottom line&quot;</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Business model- making sure investment in recruitment yields enough revenue to justify the expense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiteness</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Whiteness as a valued asset in college admissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserving Power</td>
<td>Policy/Gatekeepers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Keeping systems in place that preserve &quot;power&quot;- higher education admission powerful way to do this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Systems/Policy</td>
<td></td>
<td>AO have power- how do they view this power/responsibility?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional discretion</td>
<td>Policy/ Gatekeepers/Access Agents</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility to make decisions outside of the &quot;requirements&quot;- supported?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>navigating access points</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>How students navigate the various entry portals to higher education. Pitt...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working within a system</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Navigational Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>differential access</td>
<td>Policy/Gatekeepers/Access Agents</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not everyone enjoys the same ease of access to higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barriers</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Obstacles to gaining access to higher education- varies widely</td>
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<tr>
<td>valuing capital</td>
<td>Eliminate?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Probably redundant- holistic review and recognizing strengths outside of the 18 CP units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guidance versus student</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance counselors as a hindrance to college access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what is there vs what should be there</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Student Ready Colleges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>valuing students</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td></td>
<td>Merit aid and how it reflects how colleges &quot;value&quot; students and who is deemed &quot;valuable&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>top-down policies</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Policy decisions delivered by administration (really talking about AO power to shape their experiences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>territory management</td>
<td>Business/Access Agent</td>
<td></td>
<td>How AO make recruitment decisions and what informs those decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first-generation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>First in immediate family to attend 4-year college or university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public versus private</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
<td>Areas where public and private schools operate differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diversity is good for business</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interest convergence!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategic recruitment</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
<td>May be redundant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Action/Implication</td>
<td></td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obligation to students</td>
<td>Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>AO decisions informed by their belief that they are serving students. Recruitment and App. review. &quot;student-ready&quot; campus?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>defining worth</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Valuing students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barrier elimination</td>
<td>Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Recognizing and working to eliminate or mitigate the effects of systemic barriers to access</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bridges</td>
<td>Policy/Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cost effective recruiting</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>Informs AO decisions in how they communicate with and recruit students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>systematic exclusion</td>
<td>Policy/Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Systems/policies that exclude students-provides justification for doing so because the &quot;system&quot; is fair. Varies from person to person?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>systems</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>Useless</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equitable lens</td>
<td>Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Equity focused approach to decision making (application review and recruitment)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outside of the box</td>
<td>Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>AO approach to application review (maybe recruitment) that strays from the &quot;approved&quot; policies. More about how they think about their work than actually executing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unseen capital</td>
<td>Redundant</td>
<td>Holistic review- looking beyond the 18 units.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>traditional standards</td>
<td>Policy/Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Measures of &quot;college readiness&quot; that value what advantaged students bring to the table</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>traditional lens</td>
<td>Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Eliminate- meaningless and appears once</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balancing the books</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>Business model- managing budgets are part of AO priorities and in the forefront of their decision making in both recruitment and decision making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>navigating systems</td>
<td>&quot;College Readiness&quot;</td>
<td>AO/Students navigating the system of higher education.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partnering</td>
<td>Access Agents/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>AO relationships with students-partners in accessing higher education.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students as customers</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>AO relationship with students is built on them as customers/business interests. Relationship building...does this change how relationships are built.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Additional Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language of business</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>Extent to which who business lexicon is used in education - specifically admissions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resistant capital</td>
<td>&quot;College Readiness&quot;</td>
<td>Part of holistic review and valuing &quot;assets&quot; beyond the 18 units. Students who have realized success despite a system working against them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prestige</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>Perception of selectivity/elite status. Struggle for less-selective schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rankings and prestige</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>Selectivity and pursuit of favorable &quot;rankings&quot; particularly in national publications. Perception of selectivity is part of this. Acceptance rates etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diversity as a marketing tool</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management/Policy</td>
<td>Promoting/depicting diversity and using it as a marketing tool. Appealing to most but can be a double edged sword.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pathway to admissions officer</td>
<td>Eliminate</td>
<td>How they came to the job.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tension/adversity</td>
<td>Access Agent/Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Tension derived from interpreting guidelines and applying them to individual apps. Especially in cases where AO feels bound by admissions criteria. Stressful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>privilege</td>
<td></td>
<td>Probably eliminate - can't make the judgement on AO privilege...would be an assumption.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competition for students</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management/Policy/Systems</td>
<td>Drives recruitment efforts and formulation of policy/practices related to enrollment management. SEM and &quot;eating lunches&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>data driven</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>Recruitment especially but also seems to influence admissions and financial aid decisions. Focused on numbers to inform decisions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>selectivity</td>
<td>Strategic Enrollment Management</td>
<td>How colleges promote selectivity/exclusivity as appealing attributes. Complex situation though &quot;belonging&quot; is communicated to some extent through this perception of selectivity. (denying incomplete applications to lower acceptance rate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| humanity | Access Agents/Gatekeepers/Policy | Recognizing own humanity and its impact on decision making. Sometimes AO feel compelled to minimize its role in the decision making process in the interest of "fairness". Interesting how different AO view the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Merit/Valuing students/Policy</th>
<th>One way that colleges and universities &quot;value&quot; students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>merit and aid</td>
<td>Merit/Valuing students/Policy</td>
<td>One way that colleges and universities &quot;value&quot; students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>institutional fit</td>
<td>Extent to which a student's &quot;fit&quot; in the campus community influences decision making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>measuring college readiness</td>
<td>Redundant- link with admission requirements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;sat optional&quot;</td>
<td>What motivates the policy? Access or necessity? Covid policies are different from those that predated the pandemic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alternative routes</td>
<td>Institutionally created pathways to higher education- business motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advocacy</td>
<td>Access Agents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perception of selectivity</td>
<td>Redundant- colleges rely on perception of selectivity as a marketing tool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

importance of acknowledging their own humanity while others see it as a hindrance to making fair decisions.
Appendix D—“Roadmap”