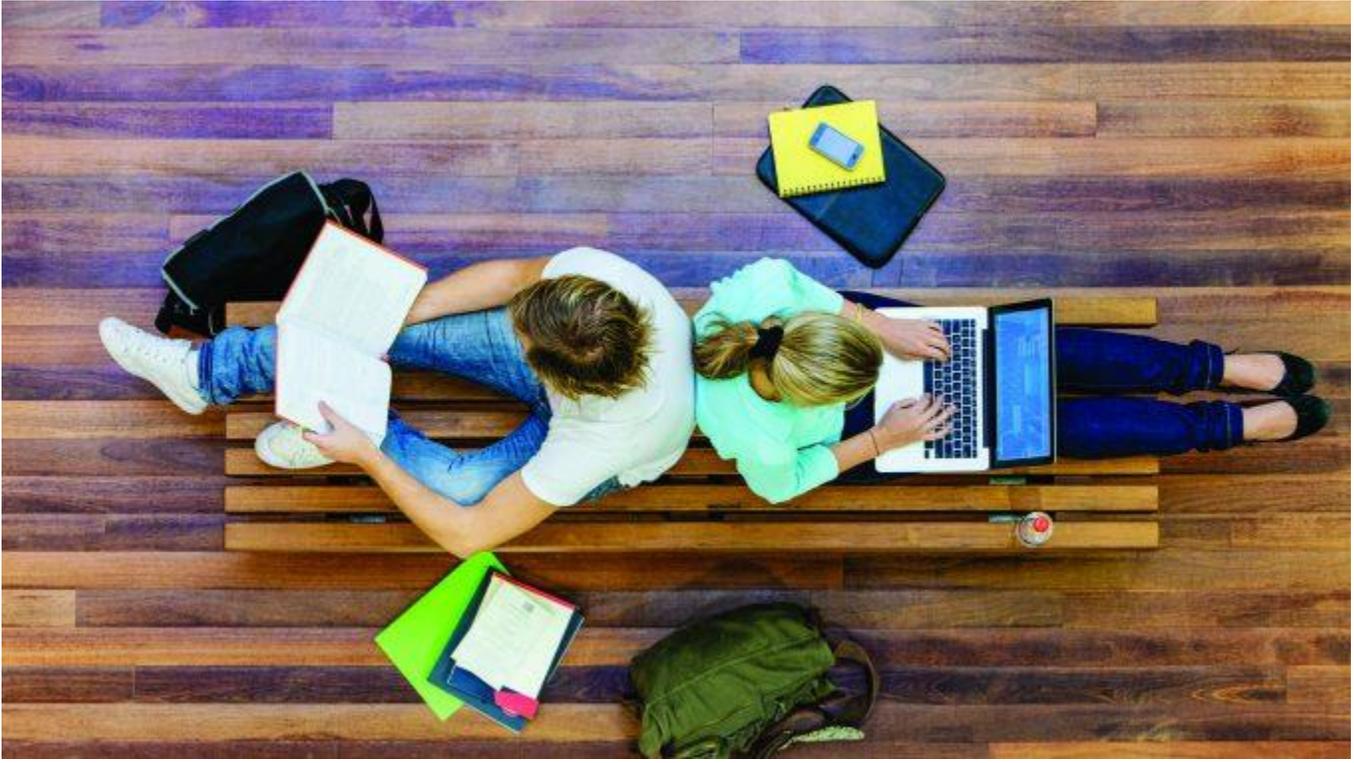


Why is college admission getting more competitive?

LEE SHULMAN BIERER



Right now, the angst among high school seniors and their parents is palpable. It is especially true this week with looming Oct. 15 deadlines at UNC Chapel Hill, N.C. State and the University of South Carolina, among others.

Almost every parent I speak with wonders, “It wasn’t this stressful when I applied to college. Why is it so much more competitive now?”

There is no denying that many of us parents wouldn’t be accepted at our own alma maters if we were applying today. Standardized test scores have inched up, and acceptance rates have dropped. Why is it so much more difficult to be admitted?

The stats each year demonstrate just how much more competitive the world of college admissions has become. Stanford rejected almost 96 percent of its applicants, and a large percentage of them had perfect SAT or ACT scores. It’s obviously not enough to be a strong student with great test scores. Those objective characteristics will get you considered, but it is the softer, subjective items that end up sealing the deal.

Think about it – there is a valedictorian and a salutatorian at every high school in the country. Don’t forget there’s also a newspaper editor and a student government president at every one, and then

think about the number of soccer players, cheerleaders, BETA club members and National Honor Society inductees. It's difficult for students to set themselves apart.

To be fair, the frenzied college admissions panic is really only among the country's most elite schools; we're talking about just 50-100 schools, when there are 4,000 or so colleges and universities across the country. Nationally, the acceptance rate for undergraduates is actually a relaxing 70 percent.

Among the top tier of public and private liberal arts institutions, applications have increased by one-third or more during the last five years alone. Yet, the available spaces have remained constant.

Here are two of the major reasons for the increased competitiveness in college admissions: There are more students, and many of these students are applying to more schools. Today's college applicants are part of what's referred to as the "Echo Boom" – the kids of Baby Boomers.

There are just more kids out there. Four years ago, there were 2.5 million high school graduates. This year, according to the federal Department of Education, there will be 3.6 million graduates.

More importantly, 30 years ago, only half of high school graduates were applying to college. Today, due in large part to our increasingly global economy, almost two-thirds of all high school graduates are applying to college.

Many students are trying to hedge their bets and are applying to more and more colleges. In 1975, only 3.2 percent of students applied to seven or more colleges. However, in 2006, that number rose to 17.4 percent. And last year, many college-bound students decided to hedge their bets and apply to as many schools as possible to secure sufficient offers of admission. In 2015, the Washington Post reported that seniors at a New Jersey high school applied to, on average, 45 colleges each, with one student applying to as many as 70 schools.

Another reason for the increase is the advent of online applications.

It's the preferred method at most schools; nearly all offer online applications. The number of people applying online jumped from 41,000 in 2000 to more than 800,000 in 2015.

Using the Common Application makes applying to colleges even easier: www.commonapp.org. It's one application used by 400 plus colleges across the country. It includes a single essay, is filled out online and students check off the colleges they would like to receive their application.

As Chandler Bing from the television show Friends would say, "Could it get any easier?" With a keystroke and the ca-ching of a credit card, students can spontaneously apply to more and more colleges. And they do.

Let's end with an encouraging statistic: What percentage of students get into their first-choice school? It's not 25 percent, not 40 percent. But more than 75 percent get the school they want. Now that's good news.

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