

October 30, 2007

The Education Conservancy
Beyond Rankings Conference
Yale University, September 25, 2007

The Education Conservancy convened a conference of over 100 participants, including presidents, faculty members, admissions directors, institutional researchers, and technology specialists from higher education institutions throughout the U.S. The meeting, entitled *Beyond Rankings: Responding to the Call for Useful Information*, was hosted by Yale University on September 25, 2007. Its purpose was to identify attributes of an information system that could better serve students and parents in selecting colleges best suited to a student's particular interests and needs, through a productive educational process that conceives of college choice as finding an appropriate match rather than winning a race. This summary of the meeting outlines central themes of the discussion; it identifies qualities that participants stressed as important in designing a system to provide meaningful information for selecting a university or college – and to help ensure that the college choice process itself comes to reflect the core educational values of universities and colleges.

Affirming the Need for Better Information

A major result from the meeting was the strong consensus among participants about the need for better information than students and parents now generally receive in choosing a college. Opening remarks by Peter Salovey, Dean of Yale College and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Yale University; Jeffrey Brenzel, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at Yale University; and Lloyd Thacker, Director of the Education Conservancy, each suggested that there is widespread dissatisfaction – among college applicants, their families, high school guidance counselors, as well as colleges and universities themselves – about the kinds of information that are widely disseminated about higher education institutions. Much of the comparative data annually compiled to inform the college choice process focuses on institutional resources and reputation more than on the educational strengths or the impact of programs on student learning and achievement. Too often the inherent message in the annual rankings is one that equates success or failure with a student's ability to gain admission to a specific institution; this conception undermines the fact that a student with ability and motivation has many pathways to educational success. The kind of information compiled and the way it is used create the impression that only a small number of institutions confer the imprimatur of distinction that leads to personal and professional success. The result is that the admissions process causes anxiety as well as cynicism in many students, leading them to game the system and go to inordinate lengths to gain admission to their target university or college. In addition, higher education institutions themselves sometimes engage in behaviors that make them appear more favorably in the rankings – for example, by not reporting SAT scores of legacy admits or athletes, or by manipulating the appearance of selectivity by rejecting high-achieving students who would not likely matriculate if admitted.

The opening remarks and discussion made clear that our purpose is not to denigrate commercial rankings but to provide newly useful information that can guide the college choice process by focusing on qualities that help students find suitable matches between their own interests and the learning environment of a university or college. From a variety of standpoints, meeting participants expressed the need to collaborate on a system that proceeds beyond rankings to exemplify the core values of higher education itself – including a hunger for learning, curiosity, hope for the future, perseverance, and hard work. It should be possible to build an admission system that supports the values that higher education institutions seek to instill in students, rather than one that undermines and diminishes those values.

Some strands of discussion considered the role of markets in college choice. The market for higher education includes a range of institutions – public and private, two- and four-year, selective and non-selective, for-profit and not-for-profit. Creating an information resource for the entirety of this market would entail considerations of very different kinds of institutions that serve students with a variety of educational goals. A first-generation college student will have a different orientation from a student with a long family history of college attendance. In addition to the market for higher education itself is a market for information that students and their parents consult to help them make choices. Some participants stressed that in a competitive society there is a natural impulse for some to seek out “the best,” highly selective college or university, just as institutions themselves naturally seek to distinguish themselves to students through their own marketing.

One suggestion was that the rise of higher education rankings can be explained in part by the confusion created in the marketing of colleges and universities, each of which claims distinctive strengths and superior achievements in many domains. As the cost of higher education has risen, commercial rankings may seem to provide a sense of clarity amid this confusion by applying common measures to institutions. Though the standards of comparison may encourage students to choose a college for the wrong reasons, institutional rankings nonetheless seem to fill a market demand by offering students and parents an objective basis for gauging the return on investment in a college education. It was observed that any system that might be developed to reflect the values identified in this meeting would itself become part of a market for information, and a key measure of success would be the extent to which students, parents, and guidance counselors consult this educational tool in the college choice process.

Considering a Different Approach

Following these exchanges was a series of presentations that offered perspectives on what educators themselves want students to know and understand if they are to make good – informed – college choices, including the need for a system that provides information more relevant to the process of educational choice. Richard Detweiler, President of the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA), observed that higher education has operated primarily in a reactive mode against the kind of information

compiled through the annual rankings to guide college choice. He suggested that the work of the Education Conservancy and other developments have made this a fitting moment for colleges and universities to begin providing information of a kind that stresses values that higher education itself considers most important for students and parents to know in choosing a college. He offered a prototype of a web-based system which included three basic components: information on what matters in college ("information"); a college learning self-assessment tool for students ("guidance"); and a tool to identify colleges that meet an individual student's interests and needs ("tools"). Seven criteria, based on discussions of GLCA presidents, were suggested for choosing a college: (1) the nature of the academic experience (liberal arts, active engagement, quality/rigor, international/global, experience based); (2) the degree to which the education is campus based; (3) the role of co-curricular programs; (4) the character and extent of faculty/student engagement; (5) the degree of focus on individual growth; (6) the role of values; and (7) degree of residentiality. In the model presented, students would take a web-based survey with questions about their own educational interests and goals based on these and other institutional characteristics. Upon completing the survey, a prospective student would be presented with a set of institutions answering to his or her priorities, along with opportunities to drill down in exploring dimensions of the institutions matching the student's criteria.

Brief comments by the presidents of three GLCA member colleges helped provide context for the presentation. Douglas Bennett, President of Earlham College, stressed the need for higher education institutions to develop professional norms in determining the kind of information they wish to make available to the public. The work of the Spellings Commission has contributed to an atmosphere of increased accountability in higher education, heightening the prospect that the federal government could impose accountability measures analogous to No Child Left Behind in K-12 schools. Rather than awaiting the mandate of external regulation, colleges and universities should be proactive in disseminating information that allows the public to understand how these institutions fulfill their educational missions. It is important that universities and colleges take the lead not just in providing information, but also in explaining why that information is important – its relevance to students and families in the college choice process, as well as to government officials and a public increasingly concerned with educational accountability.

S. Georgia Nugent, President of Kenyon College, observed that in the current environment there is a disconnect between the core strengths of higher education institutions and the information students and parents often consult in choosing a university or college. There is a need, she said, to make better information available to the public. She noted that any information resource developed from this effort would join a field of other instruments, some recently introduced, for the purposes of accountability in gauging student learning, and as aids to college choice. They include: The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research); The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) Project (Richard Hersh, Co-Director); the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), developed by the National Association of Independent Colleges and

Universities (NAICU); and the Voluntary system of Accountability (VSA) College Portrait, jointly developed by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC). Meeting participants, including representatives of some of these organizations, concurred that these efforts should not preclude the Education Conservancy from developing an information system to serve the educational market more effectively.

Dale Knobel, President of Denison University, described the process through which presidents of GLCA's member colleges had contributed to the identification of educational qualities at the core of the model Rick Detweiler had presented. He also noted a core dilemma confronting any effort to develop such a system – namely, that the educational qualities considered most important to many colleges and universities are also the ones most difficult to measure in quantitative terms. These remarks provided the context for a presentation by Ellen Falduto, Vice President and Chief Information Officer at Hartwick College. Through a series of displays, she suggested that there are meaningful indicators that can serve as proxies to gauge an institution's fulfillment of each of these key educational qualities in quantitative as well as qualitative terms.

Attributes of a Meaningful System

The meeting broke into smaller discussion groups for more detailed consideration of three aspects of the college choice process:

One set of discussions focused on *guidance*: What guidance would be appropriate to offer students as they begin to research and select prospective colleges? What kinds of advice would be most helpful to students in choosing and applying to college? What principles or values might students and their parents usefully adopt to navigate the college search process?

A second theme focused on *information*: What information about college is most important to provide students to help them make good and well-informed decisions about college? What attributes of a university or college should students know in applying to and choosing among different institutions?

A third set of discussions addressed the question of *tools*: What tools should be provided for students, families, and counselors to compare colleges? What kinds of actions should a web-based utility be capable of performing in helping students and parents make discerning choices among different institutions?

After an hour each group summarized key points from its discussion on a flip chart. Assembling again in plenary session, all participants were given the opportunity to "vote" on the relative importance of points under each theme by affixing adhesive dots to issues from the flip chart lists of every discussion group. A summary of points under each rubric follows.

Guidance. The themes from these discussions stressed the importance of students receiving guidance early in the process of selecting a college. Choosing a college entails reflection and planning for students and parents alike; for the student it requires knowing one's own interests, abilities, and motivations, as well as a willingness to think beyond an abstract conception of "the best" institution in seeking a college or university. The guidance students receive should stress that college choice does not constitute a measure of one's absolute worth or ability; it is rather a means of finding an appropriate match between a student's educational priorities and constraints and a college or university that meets those considerations. An important first step for many students may be to understand the differences between applying to highly selective institutions and a range of other universities and colleges, both two- and four-year. Financial considerations – including cost projections, availability of financial aid from different sources, or work opportunities – should be part of the guidance provided to students and parents alike. Just as a meaningful college choice process entails candid self-reflection on the part of a student, it also requires that institutions themselves be forthright about their own strengths and weaknesses as well as the qualities needed for students to enter and succeed.

A list of items from the *Guidance* discussion groups, arranged by the number of votes received (with the earlier entries receiving the highest number of dots in the "voting" process):

- Guidance comes first!
- Diagnostic self reflection and introspection
- Is what students want necessarily what is educationally best?
- What we can do: Provide information for *all* high schoolers; acknowledge the bifurcation in the process (selective/non-selective)
- Can translate best practices from schools and counselors that do guidance well
- How to balance the idiosyncrasy of the process with some general guidance
- Guidance for whom – parents, students
- Readiness – cognitive, emotional?
- Provide structured information on funding, opportunities, range of types of experiences; introduction to college – what is it?
- Honesty – who we are
- Admissions process is not a forum for personal or parental validation, but college is an environment to be valued
- Preliminary sorting – e.g., money a factor?
- Affordability (prevent sticker shock)
- Start with where students are

Information. The point that gained strongest assent from the discussions of this topic also figured prominently in the "guidance" groups – namely, the importance of beginning with a student's own interests and goals as the foundation of a college selection process. Knowing oneself is key to finding a university or college that can

provide avenues to individual achievement. Many participants affirmed that information should be presented in a way that provides broad oversight for initial comparison and affords opportunities for pursuing more detailed information on particular schools of interest. Information should be organized in ways that are easily discernable and amenable to navigation and search. The organization of information should allow a student to consider and compare institutions in the context of his or her particular interest – rather than forcing users through a profusion of entries in formats that impede finding answers to specific questions. The information presented and the mode of presentation should reflect core educational values of universities and colleges themselves, conveying what institutions think is most important to know in choosing a college and why. While information should address student interests, it should also serve to stimulate thinking and inquiry, challenging students to press beyond their initial conceptions and consider aspects of a learning environment that would encourage and require personal growth.

A list of items from the *Information* discussion groups, arranged by the number of votes received:

- Start with *students*, reflection of self-examination (“What color is my parachute?”)
- Information provided in two steps: first to narrow choice; second, to find fit.
- Distillation of most important qualities of an institution
- Roadmap of guidance – information
- Philosophy: we lead with what is important
- Fit is good, but students should be challenged and colleges want diversity
- Typology of higher education institutions; explanation of terms
- Give students/parents *all* the information we have, including how the admissions process works

Tools. The most salient theme from this group parallels that which stood out in both the “guidance” and “information” sessions: any tool developed to make the college search process more meaningful for students must begin with a student’s own interests as the basis for comparing institutions. Rather than beginning with an abstract definition of institutional quality as measured by resources, selectivity, or reputation, the discussion groups stressed the need to begin with a student’s own sense of his or her educational strengths and needs. Another well-delineated theme from the “tools” group is the importance of providing the insights and perspectives of students who are enrolled in particular institutions – and of employing the technologies and social networking protocols (such as YouTube and Facebook) that young people prefer to use in searching information and communicating with others. The concept of introducing major components of institutions in a first glimpse with opportunities to inquire more particularly figured strongly in the “tools” discussions, as it did in other groups’ exchanges. Finally, a question attracting notable attention from the “tools” discussions was how an educational search utility might be developed and how to attract funding for such a project. To create an educational search tool and have it succeed in the marketplace for college information would require a partnership with others who can

provide financial resources. A concern voiced in the tools groups and underscored by others is that partnerships with major players could potentially result in a loss of control and distortion of the project's fundamental purpose. Partnerships are necessary for the project to succeed, but they must be engaged with a conviction to maintain the emphasis on educational value in the college choice process.

A list of items from the *Tools* discussion groups, arranged by the number of votes received:

- Critical tool should allow user to narrow range of institutions based on self-profile or system's response to inputs
- Interactive Questions
- Peer to peer (P2P) and institutional self-reported tools
- Teach users how to conduct their college search
- Guidance pervasive at every level
- Video game/second life
- Let big guys do it = loss of control
- Perhaps partner with deep pockets/influence and integrity/goodwill
- Needs to be transparent
- Perhaps build on CD's and/or existing sources
- Simulation
- Produce a short list for further inquiry (individual preferences)
- What impact does the information we provide make of the student's process of education and beyond?
- Needs the right mix of quick and yet detailed
- Need to be able to drill down and move laterally
- Controlled search
- Data mining, student match

Looking Forward: Considerations

The last portion of the meeting reaffirmed the importance of proceeding in the development of an information system that provides prospective students with more complete and useful information, for the purposes of college choice as well as for institutional accountability. Some stressed the significance of the meeting itself as a common statement of need from higher education institutions that compete with one another for students. It was also pointed out that the real test of a collaborative effort would come in the next steps taken to develop and test a pilot system. As one observed, while these institutions are collectively worried about the current information environment, they will also need to be collectively motivated if they genuinely seek to improve that environment. The project will need to engage partnerships and attract funding in order to go forward; to do these things will require a willingness among institutions to collaborate on many fronts.

Some comments addressed the fact that a new information instrument would need to serve a range of constituents, including students and their parents. Very often there are differences of perspective between the two; it was pointed out that a common goal in college admissions is to create a channel of communication with a student that is separate from that of parents. Students may be seeking qualities, not fully disclosed to their parents, that have more to do with the social environment than with the academic character of an institution.

Another consideration is that the act of compiling and making available the kind of data identified for this project will require a substantial institutional research effort. A project of this type could potentially confer an advantage on institutions that have greater resources to collect and contribute data to such a utility.

One set of exchanges centered on the question of how the developers of such a project would know if it was successful. Several participants observed that success would be a function not just of an instrument's fitness for use but also its success in the market for information and guidance in the college choice process. The instrument should be organic in nature, capable of being expanded or modified to meet a changing environment for higher education. At the same time, one of the most important indicators of success would be the degree to which high school guidance counselors turn to such a system as a reliable source of information for successive cohorts of students seeking a college. For students and parents, the college choice process constitutes an intense but comparatively brief season of life. It is guidance counselors, however, who spend their professional lives helping students navigate the complex journey from high school to college. A telling indicator of success would be for guidance counselors to adopt an information tool developed from this project as a resource of high integrity and value – to students, parents, and themselves as guidance professionals.

The closing moments of the meeting reiterated the tenor of thinking that had pervaded the exchanges throughout the day: there was strong affirmation of the need to develop a system that provides students with more robust and meaningful information to guide the college choice process – a system that conveys important information about individual universities and colleges, at the same time it instills in students and parents a more informed perspective on the process of choosing a college. The meeting constituted a strong measure of support for its conveners to proceed in developing a web-based tool that can provide the market with better information for the college choice process.

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