It Only Gets Worse From Here

Glenn C. Altschuler 08.13.08, 6:00 PM ET

Some of the best students at Washington-Lee High School in Arlington, Va., are obsessed about getting into a prestigious college.

According to social studies teacher Rob Summers, juniors and seniors "grade grub," take advanced placement classes for "the quality point," and stuff their résumés with band, baseball, bread baking, Class Council, Key Club, and candy-striping. They get a professional to polish their personal essay and ask "anybody and everybody" to write letters of recommendation. They miss classes to visit a dozen or more safety schools, stretches and straight shots. In March they begin to exhibit symptoms of "fat envelope frenzy."

Little wonder. For more than a decade, a "baby boomlet" in the U.S. has boosted the ranks of high school graduates. The class of 2009 will exceed 3 million strong. And as public policy analyst Kevin Carey points out, a significant increase in college applications per student makes the admissions environment even more crowded. In 1991 about 59% of high school seniors applied to three or more colleges. In 2006 that number had skyrocketed to 71%, and about 18% of seniors applied to seven or more institutions.

The fact is, at most institutions of higher education, admissions odds remain very good. In 2007 about 70% of all students got into their first-choice school, a rate that has not changed all that much for 20 years. Over 80% of four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. still accept more than half of all applicants. The silent majority of students have no reason to make the transition from high school to a fine college a multiyear nightmare.

Yet in our "winner-take-all society" all you hear about is the deluge of rejection letters from top-tier schools. Stories circulate about devastated valedictorians and savants with perfect SAT scores. After all, in 2008 Harvard admitted a mere 7.1% of the 27,462 high school seniors who applied; Bowdoin College and Georgetown University gave thumbs-up to fewer than one out of five in their pool of candidates. Since admissions officials acknowledge that many of the young men and women who don't get in are as likely to excel as those they accept, you can't blame inconsolable kids or cynical parents for concluding that the process is random--or that it's rigged.

In 2010, the battle of the bulge in undergraduate admissions will come to an end. Although the number of Hispanic and Asian-American students and youngsters from low-income families will continue to rise (while the African-American population stays steady), the total number of high school seniors in the U.S. will begin to decline. The sharpest drop will come in the Northeast and the Midwest--and among white students with well-educated parents, the cohort most likely to attend to college.

The impact of these changes will vary, depending on the resources and reputation of each college and university. Schools that cannot recruit nationally may have to dig deeper into the applicant pool. To protect those national rankings that measure the grade point average and standardized test scores of an entering class, public and private institutions may also offer attractive financial aid packages to a few stellar students, even if they come from affluent families.

Virtually every school will be on the lookout for qualified male applicants. In high school, women now outnumber men--and tend to be better students. At Washington-Lee, Summers reports, 69 females and only 37 males are enrolled in the challenging International Baccalaureate Diploma Program.

Not surprisingly, by 2009 58% of undergraduate college degrees will be awarded to women. Jennifer Delahunty Britz, dean of admissions and financial aid at Kenyon College, suggests that at colleges that have reached the "tipping point"--with females constituting at least 60% of the undergraduate population--you'll hear a hint of desperation in the voices of admissions officers. It could be good news for young men, though, who may discover that even if they do less, they will have more options.
These developments are unlikely to alter the hyper-competitive climate at highly selective colleges and universities. Most of them have intensified their efforts to attract students from the Southwest and West, hiring admissions officers to live in the region and offering airplane tickets to enable Sun Belt students to visit their campuses. And the "no loan" policies of several leading institutions--including Cornell University, where I teach--will almost certainly increase applications, as working-class and middle-class families throughout the U.S. look for the best and most affordable education for their kids.

Finally, a surge of interest from international students in American colleges and universities has only just begun. Many of the problems, real and perceived, that deterred applications from abroad following Sept. 11, 2001, have been addressed by the federal departments of state and homeland security. Although China, India and Korea have increased their number of higher-education seats at home, an "enormous unmet and growing demand remains," says Peggy Blumenthal, a vice president at the Institute for International Education. With over 1 million high schools, China is producing volumes of valedictorians with a desire to matriculate at marquee American universities.

And so, for the foreseeable future, there won't be much more room at the top. Many of America's best and brightest will experience rejection, perhaps for the first time, and then get a fat envelope from a first-rate school. Later in life, they'll understand--and may also wonder--why getting into that one "special" school mattered to them so very much.

Complete Coverage: America's Best Colleges

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.