A Message to a Community of Educational Leaders

An Open Letter to Professionals in Admissions, Financial Aid and Counseling

Preserving the Dream of America

From the College Board’s Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century

November 2008
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Preserving the Dream of America

Dear Colleagues:

Each year the college dreams of millions of students are affected by the work of admissions and financial aid officers and school counselors. This is a tremendous responsibility — and a great opportunity. Making the benefits of college available to all students helps improve individual lives and strengthens our nation as a whole. Yet it is clear that the transition from high school to college has become an increasingly complicated and confusing process, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds and for first-generation college students. How can we make sure that all students have a clear picture of the college options and opportunities available to them so that they and their families understand that college is within their reach?

Two years ago, the College Board convened the Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century, a group of leaders of the admissions, financial aid, enrollment management and school counseling communities, to address the growing complexity of the admissions process in light of changing demographics. The overarching goal of the task force was to address the broad challenges that face the admissions profession and higher education to create greater educational opportunities for all students.

Under the leadership of Jerry Lucido, vice provost for enrollment policy and management at the University of Southern California, the task force examined a broad range of issues and looked for ways in which the College Board, in collaboration with its members, could contribute to solutions that would best serve students as they prepare for, apply to and enroll in postsecondary institutions. In its report, entitled “Preserving the Dream of America: An Open Letter to Professionals in Admissions, Financial Aid and Counseling,” the task force begins by articulating the values that underlie the profession and then proposes a set of actions to support these values and guide the profession into the 21st century.

I would like to thank each of the members of the Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century for their dedication to their profession and for their commitment to increasing college access and success for all students. Please join me in congratulating the task force on its excellent work.

Sincerely,

Gaston Caperton
A Summary Statement from the Task Force Chair

William E. Kirwan
Chancellor
University System of Maryland
Chairman
College Board Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education

Gaston Caperton
President
The College Board

Dear Chancellor Kirwan and President Caperton:

I am pleased to submit to you the results of nearly two and one-half years of work by the College Board’s Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century. The submission comes in three parts. The first is this letter that serves as the foreword to our formal report to you and to our profession. The second is our task force report, “Preserving the Dream of America,” an open letter to professionals in admissions, financial aid and counseling. The third is a data compilation, “Summary of Selected Data on P-20 Education in America,” a fairly comprehensive review of 10 significant indicators of the nation’s educational health.

On behalf of my colleagues on the task force, I am pleased both to transmit these documents to you and to request a response from your commission, a request to which I will return as I conclude this letter.

As you know, a frequent theme in a wide variety of meetings involving College Board members — the annual Forum, regional meetings and gatherings of various councils — is that admissions processes and practices are changing. They are changing on the part of students and their families, as well as on the part of the secondary and higher education communities. In 2006, in response to this reality, the College Board convened a small group of experienced enrollment management leaders to begin examining the current state of the profession and to advise the College Board about what role it might play in helping its members improve the school-to-college transition.

I was privileged to chair that group, which evolved as it grew into the current task force of 43 members, a broad constituency representing public and private schools, as well as public and private two- and four-year colleges and universities. It hardly needs saying, but I want to add: These people included some of the best and most professional and influential leaders of the admissions, financial aid, enrollment management and school counseling communities. I am proud to have had the opportunity to work with them.

Our members wanted an open and candid discussion involving all participants. With the help of our able staff, led by Fred Dietrich and Brad Quin, we began a series of carefully structured agendas on key topics. We covered a lot of ground. Early on we began to worry about rankings and commercial interests and their effect on our institutions and our profession. We looked into technology, financial aid, merit scholarships, leakage in the P-20 pipeline and school and university standards, as well as demographic shifts and what they mean for the pool of college-going students.
We worried about public trust. Who represents our institutions and speaks for them? We looked into our processes. Are they too complicated and intimidating? What about costs and financing? Has student aid kept pace? The demographic profile of high school graduates is changing. What does that mean in real terms? In light of these demographic shifts, are our institutional goals aligned with the societal goal of increased access and an America that continues to be the land of opportunity?

These are not easy issues. Sometimes we struggled, in part because although all of us shared a common interest in the well-being of our students, each of us approached this interest from different institutional platforms and from different professional perspectives. And also there was something else — the school-to-college transition does not function in a vacuum. It functions within a quite complex web of environmental and societal realities that are further modified by the individuals involved in the process, as well as by interests specific to each institution.

Amidst all that detail, it is easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees. We concluded that our most important task would be to remind the community for which we speak that at the end of the day we are all educators. What we are about is the development of human potential. And education, above all, is the social function in this society that shapes our future. When all is said and done, our task is about helping to deliver on the promise that is America by building a society that is open and free, respectful and democratic, one that values access and opportunity as well as merit and excellence, and one in which both hard work and ability are their own rewards.

In “Preserving the Dream of America” we try to speak to our community, however inarticulately, about the importance of these issues. In support of that vision, we developed a 10-part statement of the values that should guide our community as it moves forward. By community, we mean admissions, financial aid, school counseling and enrollment management professionals — the people whose voices we try to represent. We believe that we speak for our community when we assert that we must rededicate ourselves and our institutions to serving the public good if we are to realize our hopes for the nation.

With respect to the data book, “Selected Data on P-20 Education in America” (see Appendix A), we wish simply to note two things. First, Americans can take great pride in all that their schools, colleges and universities have accomplished over the years. We have the most highly educated population on the face of the earth. Our economy is the most productive in the family of nations. And our best universities, judged by research output, remain the envy of the world.

Second, if we are to maintain these advantages, the leaders of our schools, colleges and universities must pay attention to the alarming indicators outlined in this data book. Most of our educational strengths are what economists call “first mover advantages.” Other nations are rapidly catching up. We no longer lead the world in the proportion of high school graduates. We will have to play catch-up to regain our position as number one in terms of producing young college graduates. We lose shamefully high numbers of students, from both our high schools and our colleges and universities. And large numbers of high school graduates are prepared for neither work nor higher education. Unfortunately, an economic crisis has emerged in America as we prepare to publish our work. Our challenges are now more difficult, but it is ever more critical that we succeed.

And now to the request the task force asked me to make on its behalf. It also comes in two parts. First, our task force includes in its open letter a declaration of values to guide our community. They govern such things as the need to understand that a college degree is essential in the modern world…education is a process, not a product… the admissions process should be seen as a learning opportunity for students and families…
student preparation must be improved…professional norms should govern college admissions…financial aid processes should be simplified and focused…and a serious re-examination of rankings is in order. Our task force members commit themselves to taking up these issues at their K-12 schools and on their campuses.

We are convinced most members of our community will be eager to endorse these values, but, as is often the case, we also anticipate that some institutions may ignore this call. We ask that you explicitly put the influence and prestige of the commission, and the presidents and chancellors who make up its membership, behind these values. More directly, we ask that your commission members also commit themselves to taking up these issues on their own campuses.

Second, the task force responded to the charge first presented to it (advise the College Board about what role it might play in helping its members improve the school-to-college transition) by developing a plan for at least 10 training modules to be supported by the College Board and made up of booklets and professional development opportunities for the community, including its newest members. We also ask that your commission respond favorably to this request, simply to support the College Board leadership, which endorsed these ideas the minute they were broached.

I want to add that our task force knows that your commission is engaged with many of the issues that concerned us. You are interested in a college-preparatory curriculum as the default high school program. You have explored teaching issues involved with K-12 quality. You are equally concerned with institutional accountability in higher education and measures of institutional quality, such as rankings. We applaud your interest in the educational pipeline and commitment to easy flow of students from K-12 into higher education, including transitions between and among two- and four-year institutions. We support your commitment to improving public policy regarding student aid, including a renewed emphasis on the importance of focusing public and institutional aid on those students in greatest financial need. And we know you are committed to fulfilling America’s human potential by reducing school and college dropout rates. We want you to know that the task force stands ready to help you accomplish these objectives in any way we can.

Let me close by saying that your commission has a large and complex agenda before it, as did our task force. I hope you can take heart from what we learned: It is in struggling with complexity that we discover simplicity, it is in confusion that we find clarity, and it is in maintaining the dream that is America that we fulfill ourselves as educators.

If I or the other members of the task force can assist you in any way with your work, I hope you know you have only to ask.

With all good wishes,

Jerome A. Lucido
University of Southern California
Chair
Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century
Vice Chair
Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education
Dear Colleagues:

We write as allies and friends — each of us an admissions, financial aid or school counseling professional — to express our sense of urgency about the problems and opportunities before us. Like you, all of us believe in the value of American education. The nation’s two- and four-year colleges and universities have provided opportunity to millions of Americans. They have built local communities. They have sustained America and its people. Throughout our history they have adapted to the changing needs of the nation and the world. Our nation faces new challenges today, but we have every confidence our institutions can continue to adapt and respond.

The task before us as educational leaders is twofold. We must maintain our legacy of world-class teaching, research and public service. And we must respond to the new realities of the school-to-college transition in the 21st century. And we as a profession must lead that response.

All of us know that our institutions are beset by changes in the environment around us — rapidly changing demographics and enrollment shifts, new technologies and new profit-making competitors, constrained public funding and growing resistance to price hikes, and a newly questioning public and limited institutional flexibility. Each of us is struggling with these issues in our own way. These challenges are not simply technical issues of how to allocate revenues, manage enrollment or apportion classroom and dormitory space, but difficult adaptive problems of how to lead when conditions are changing, resources are tight, expectations are high and options seem limited. We live in an age of transformational, not technical, change. Our leadership, like our institutions, must be transformational as well.

Preserving the **Dream of America**
Part I: The Broad Admissions Picture

Against that backdrop, it is clear that in the early years of the 21st century the transition from high school to college has become more difficult and challenging. A variety of factors account for this — some are within our control, many are not. The complexity of the admissions and financial aid processes is surely a problem. Multiple deadlines and arcane distinctions between “early admission,” “early decision,” “regular decision” and “rolling admissions” seem overly complicated to many families. Financial aid forms often make IRS schedules look like child’s play. The accumulation of these difficulties makes for an opaque and frequently confusing process for applicants, particularly for low-income and first-generation students.

**Changing Demographics.** There will be more such students. Changing demographics are an issue. The evidence is clear: The proportion of low-income and minority students in the college admissions pools will grow dramatically in coming decades. One analysis indicates that all of the enrollment growth in the high school applicant pool will be made up of students from minority groups, with the population of Hispanic and Latino students more than doubling. Low-income and minority students have not, on average, been well prepared by traditional standards; and large numbers and proportions of first-year students, at both two- and four-year institutions, require remediation. Unless preparation improves, the implications for our institutions are troubling.

Population shifts between regions complicate the issue, as some institutions (both public and private) in the Midwest wrestle with the problem of filling classes while, elsewhere, other institutions struggle to provide enough places.

**Misguided Public Discussion.** The nature of the public discussion is itself a problem. A fair reading of the press coverage about the costs and difficulty of getting into college would conclude that much of the discussion is misguided. Reflecting the experiences of less than one percent of nearly 3,400 accredited American institutions of higher education, this coverage tends to overstate costs, misrepresent the reality of the school-to-college transition and even discourage aspiration for college attendance. The truth is that there is a place on a college campus for any high school graduate. There is no single set of standards for college admission in this country — nor should there be. It should also be noted that 83 percent of undergraduates enroll at institutions where tuition and fees are very reasonable. Nearly half (46 percent) of all undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges, where tuition and fees averaged $2,361 in 2007-08. An additional 37 percent enrolled at public four-year institutions, where in-state tuition and fees averaged $6,185 in the same year. These realities are rarely reported to the general public. Instead, press accounts frequently offer advice on how to beat the admissions “game” and find the “best values.”

**A Rankings Arms Race.** We in the profession must also acknowledge our own contributions to this state of affairs. There is little doubt that a rankings arms race has developed among some colleges and universities. Indeed, the race has recently spread to secondary schools, with newly emerging lists of superior high schools, most of which are located in desirable and affluent ZIP codes.

In many ways, the rankings are a symptom of what’s wrong. The rankings, developed for commercial purposes, threaten to distort educational goals. They explicitly encourage the misguided notion that where one goes to college is more important than college attendance itself. Credible recent research suggests these rankings distort institutional priorities by encouraging the redistribution of institutional resources, creating a template to define institutional quality and contributing to the expansion of funds for merit scholarships.

Competition among institutions has its place, but as Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard, and Lee C. Bollinger, president of Columbia University, have separately noted, competitive measurement of colleges and universities is notoriously unreliable. Indeed, Bollinger argued in a 2002 address to the...
College Board’s annual Forum, it is academically “irresponsible” to behave as though unbiased measures of institutional quality exist. Academic competition has to be about the right things and the right values, turning on issues that serve society well.

Here we point to a societal issue of pressing national concern: Although the mailboxes of high-achieving students overflow with letters urging them to apply to colleges across the country, the mailboxes of nearly half a million potential college students sit empty because their high school grades and test results are disappointing.

Finally, we point to one of the greatest threats on the American horizon: the dawn of a new Gilded Age. Between 1970 and 1990, the median income for individuals has been essentially stagnant. Middle-income living standards have been maintained on a mountain of debt and two incomes. But families are running out of second earners to put to work, household debt is at all time highs, and the United States, once the world’s greatest creditor is now its greatest debtor.

The “Haves” and the “Have-Not.” A related challenge involves the “haves” and the “have-nots.” For the first time since the era of the robber barons, we face the prospect of two Americas divided by income, one well educated and affluent, and the other underprepared and poor. America, the wealthiest nation in the history of humanity, has the highest proportion of low-income families and children in the developed world.

What is at risk here is the essence of the American ideal: the great promise that each generation, by dint of its effort and hard work, would enjoy higher levels of education and higher standards of living than the generation that preceded it. For more than 200 years, Americans have kept that promise. Many of us have reaped the benefits. Today, the compact among the generations is threatened, the promise of America as the land of opportunity is at risk, and our children and grandchildren stand to lose.

The dream that is America is made up of three parts: opportunity, community and security. Our view is unshakable. We believe that in pursuit of that dream, American education—K-12 through graduate school—is this nation’s greatest strength and most powerful force. The nation’s schools and colleges and universities create opportunity, build community and advance the national interest. They have always done so. And they always will.

**Engines of Economic Opportunity.**

Americans admire people who get ahead through their own effort. Individual progress through work and struggle is an appealing thread in our national story. Although the United States has not always lived up to its own best instincts, the nation’s belief in individual opportunity is a powerful metaphor for what is best in the American spirit.

Our institutions have been a significant factor in this story. The nation’s two- and four-year colleges and universities are where the American Dream stumbled on a mechanism ideally designed to bring the dream to life. One of the happy results of that encounter was the explosive growth of the American economy throughout the last century.

American higher education is simply an extraordinary engine of economic opportunity. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that an individual with a college degree is far more secure economically than a high school graduate. To state the obvious first, college graduates are far less likely to be unemployed (and if unemployed to be out of work for shorter periods of time) than men and women who did not attend college. Beyond that, an adult with an associate degree typically earns about 25 percent more over the course of a working life than a high school graduate. A bachelor’s degree provides an even higher average premium, about 60 percent more than a high school diploma. Entering graduate or professional school is even more rewarding financially, with doctoral recipients earning nearly 2.4 times what a high school graduate earns, a figure that jumps to nearly 2.9 times for professionals, such as engineers, doctors and lawyers.
Building a Community. Income and employment are but one measure of the value of a college education. The data also reveal that people with higher levels of educational attainment are also likely to be more active citizens, more satisfied with their lives, and more likely to vote and to contribute to the common good. In short, in building a community, colleges and universities help create a benevolent society.

This capacity to shape a community goes far beyond the prodigious scholarship of American higher education, encompassing everything from the marvels of antiquity to trailblazing medical research and explorations of the human genome. Higher education’s contributions here include public seminars and speakers, teaching hospitals, theatrical productions, art exhibits, community engagement, intercollegiate athletics and support for local school improvement efforts. Together these activities expand human potential, extend life through the miracles of modern medicine, shape the human imagination and offer local communities excellence in everything from the arts to college sports. The nation’s colleges and universities are one of the places in America where, in a complex and frequently threatening world, the better angels of our nature come together to create and sustain a sense of community.

Protecting the American Future. Our colleges and universities, public and private, have helped support American life during times of growth and defended American interests in times of peril. Whether in colonial times or during and after the Civil War, World War II and the launching of Sputnik, American institutions of higher education have responded when the nation has called. They provided the professionals who helped launch a new nation, the engineers and agricultural experts who opened the West, the science that catapulted men and women into space and brought them home safely, and the foreign language specialists and area studies experts, along with the weapons and technical know-how, that helped win World War II and the Cold War. And they built the classrooms and dorms that welcomed veterans home under various versions of the GI Bill, fueling a boom in economic growth that has lasted for two generations across the United States.

As we move fully into the 21st century our institutions can be counted on to respond again. New advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, nanotechnology, information technology, genetics, biomedicine, and superconductivity and materials science promise to transform our world in the next two decades. We may see as much technical change in the next five years as we witnessed in the last 50. If the United States is to be at the cutting edge of these developments, it quite clearly needs to develop the human resources (in the form of college graduates) capable of developing this new knowledge and putting it to work for our country and its people.

Our capacity to pull this off is not assured. All the recent signs are that while the United States remains a world leader in the production of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates, emerging nations such as China and India are rapidly making up ground. Recent results from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment provide another troubling straw in the wind: The United States, the unquestioned 1960s leader in graduating students from high school and providing access to higher education for young adults, has slipped badly. Ranked number one in the world in the 1960s in the proportion of young people graduating from high school, it now ranks 13th; meanwhile, Korea has vaulted from 27th place to first. At the same time, the United States, which remains first in the world in the proportion of workers ages 55 to 65 holding a college degree, ranks just seventh in the proportion of younger workers (ages 25 to 34) with a degree.

Economic competitiveness is urgent, but potentially at stake is something even more significant — the quality of life across the globe. Most of us are aware of the potential environmental disasters of global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer...
and the existence of mountains and landfills of toxic waste. These issues demand the best thinking of American scientists and schools of public policy. And they require more research to develop solutions, along with more scientists and engineers to address these challenges.

Those are the stakes in this discussion: preserving the dream and the ideal that is America, building a community that looks forward confidently to the future, helping define the threats to the American future and our way of life and pointing the way ahead.

We start with admissions, financial aid and school counseling professionals and invite you to join us. In responding to these developments, we begin by returning to our values. We can find hope for our future if we build on the best of what we inherit from our past.

We can play a leadership role in our schools, colleges and universities if we reaffirm our ideals and values, adhere to them tenaciously and follow their implications faithfully wherever they lead. Although we have some understanding of how to proceed, we are modest in our understanding about what needs to be done. We have no final answers. We promise, instead, to ask the right questions and to join you in the search for solutions.

In the large and complex enterprise that is American higher education (with its 17.5 million students and 3.4 million faculty and staff and some 3,400 two- and four-year nonprofit institutions), it is clear that the search for solutions must carefully balance at least three elements — the needs of students, diverse institutional missions and national priorities. Our task force offers you two elements that respect this balance and help lay the foundation for a new educational rebirth in the United States: First, a declaration of values to shape how we will pursue our work in the 21st century; second, seven action commitments to advance these values.

A Declaration of Values to Guide a Profession

Preamble:
A new definition of academic excellence is needed in the United States. It should be more inclusive, more focused on student needs and more dedicated to “developing talent” instead of “selecting for talent” in the admissions process. To that end, we offer 10 principles to guide admissions, financial aid and school counseling professionals.

We believe that:

I. **Education is essential in this new century.**
Unlike the 20th century, in this new world a college-educated citizenry is vital to the well-being of the United States. A college education (two- or four-year) should be within the reach of everyone. To meet this goal, educators need to improve both high school and college graduation rates and
recognize that unequal educational opportunities for some students require extraordinary responses from us all.

II. **Institutional diversity is one of our greatest assets.** The strength of American higher education lies in its diversity: All sectors of higher education have important roles to play in responding to the nation’s educational challenges. The diversity of our system and the many missions pursued by some 4,000 accredited, nonprofit, two- and four-year colleges and universities are essential to this diverse nation.

III. **Education is a process, not a product.** The profession (made up of admissions and financial aid officers and school counselors) understands education to be a process, not a product, and students to be learners, not clients or customers. Competition and commercialism in our environment should not deter us from our educational goals and values.

IV. **The school-to-college transition should be seen as a learning opportunity.** At its best, admission is about “fit” between student and institution. The profession encourages students and parents to see college admission as part of an educational learning process, one that encourages student exploration, autonomy, responsibility and maturity.

V. **Student preparation must be improved.** We believe that schools and colleges and universities should collaborate to make a college-preparatory curriculum the “default” curriculum for every student, beginning in eighth grade, with planning starting in middle school. The content standards reflected in Achieve’s “American Diploma Project,” the Advanced Placement® and International Baccalaureate programs and the College Board Standards for College Success™ are all good places to start building rigorous curricula that prepare all students for college enrollment and success.

VI. **School-university partnerships are essential and should be expanded and strengthened.** The profession encourages school-university partnerships to improve academic preparation, foster student aspiration and provide early awareness programs for all students — especially for first-generation college students and their families.

VII. **Professional norms must govern student admission.** The profession insists that colleges and universities should commit to 1) providing concise information about their programs and requirements; 2) presenting themselves clearly, forthrightly and accurately; 3) selecting students using valid and equitable methods; and 4) using test results in accordance with professional norms and expectations (see Appendix B for the College Board’s guidelines on responsible use of admissions examinations).

VIII. **Financial aid processes should be simplified and focused.** The profession believes that financial aid processes (at the institutional, state and federal levels) need to be simplified and made more coherent and predictable, with the goal of minimizing confusion on the part of students and families. The profession also believes that merit aid, particularly when financed publicly by regressive taxes or lotteries, has to clear a very high bar before it can justify itself as appropriate student aid.

IX. **Access to “success,” not simply access, must be the goal.** As the College Board’s College Keys Compact™ emphasized, admission is a hollow promise without financial aid and sustainable academic support. The profession believes that all institutions and faculty must be dedicated to the success of students once they are admitted. The institutional aspiration should be that all students succeed in attaining the goals they set for themselves upon enrollment, e.g., a training certificate, successful transfer to a four-year institution or an associate or bachelor’s degree.
X. **College rankings must be revisited.**
The profession urges the College Board to convene a panel of experts (including educators, statisticians, sociologists and students of organizational behavior) to explore the validity, reliability and value of existing rankings and suggest, if necessary, new ways of providing better information to students and the general public. What the profession needs are accurate and educationally defensible assessments that focus on outcomes and help students and the public understand institutional value and functioning, without minimizing the importance of diversity or distorting institutional purposes.

We are convinced that this 10-part statement draws on the best in our past, while providing a grounded agenda for our profession in a new century. We hope that, whether in a school or a college or a university, you will be able to use this statement with your faculty and institutional leadership as an ongoing guide to renew the institutional discussion about the school-to-college transition and launch a conversation about student success.

Far from serving as lofty, unattainable goals, these values represent our firm expectations. Many institutions are already making these expectations real. What matters at least as much as the destination is an unflinching commitment to the journey and to excellence in meeting the needs of students.

We believe that the success of our profession in the years ahead must be judged against the extent to which these values serve as guides to action. With these values in place, we can remain true to the best in our past; without them, we can easily lose sight of our mission and purpose.

**Implications of These Principles**
To us, these principles appear to lead inexorably to a new way of looking at the school-to-college transition: They imply that:

- students, understanding the admissions process as a learning opportunity, will take greater responsibility for their own transition;
- school counselors and teachers will be thinking about college preparation from the middle school on, while practically all high school students will be enrolled in curricula designed to put them on the path to college;
- financial aid processes will be simpler, clearer and more predictable;
- the greatest resources will be directed toward K-12 students in need of the greatest assistance;
- test results will be used appropriately in the admissions process and, because assessment outcomes will be related to educational values, there will be less temptation to “game” indicators in order to improve institutional standing and prestige; and
- our profession will continue to rest on the foundation of ethical practice long promoted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, the College Board, the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators and others.
Action Commitments
We have developed seven action commitments that we hope everyone in the admissions, financial aid and counseling communities can support. We ask you to join us in using these commitments to turn the statement of values into reality. We believe these action steps help define what our profession can become in the 21st century. The action commitments are:

1. **The task force, with the support of the College Board, will develop at least 10 training modules to advance the broad agenda laid out in this document.** The training modules will be made up of monographs on specific topics, each designed to explicate these issues and describe best practice. These monographs will be tied to training opportunities that introduce the topics to the admissions, financial aid and school counseling community, particularly to its newest members. These modules will be deep and rich, going to the core of what admissions, financial aid and school counselors need to know and do: how to reach out to low-income and first-generation students; how to simplify the processes of admissions and student aid; how to communicate earlier and effectively with counselors, students and parents; and how to accurately and reliably assess academic readiness for college.

Training may be provided during the College Board’s annual Forum, its annual regional meetings or both. In making these opportunities available, the task force is particularly eager to make sure that incoming professionals (admissions, financial aid and counseling) in the community have full access to them. The task force is also eager to collaborate with other professional organizations in making the monographs and training sessions more widely available. The modules contemplated include:

- **Advocacy.** At the state and national levels, training will help the community understand how best to advocate for the changes it seeks in school curricula, staffing standards for counselors, and financial aid and the like so that students are better prepared by public policy and better served by our schools, colleges and universities.

- **Communications.** This module will explore how to improve communication, which is understood as a three-way intersection involving students and families, as well as schools and colleges and universities. We want to make sure that all students have a clear and accurate picture of the opportunities available to them and understand how to take advantage of those opportunities. The messages parents and students need to hear are: There is a place for everyone. There are resources to support you. We are here to help you find a good fit.

- **Complexity.** The emphasis will be on the complexity of the school-to-college transition and the transfer between two- and four-year institutions, and in finding ways to simplify this complexity. How can we help anxious students and parents navigate this difficult process?

- **Demographics.** The wave of demographic change, already evident in K-12 programs, will soon arrive at the doors of the nation’s colleges and universities. This module will explore how to respond to and benefit from the diversity the new demographics promise. In particular, we will want to improve how we serve growing numbers of low-income, minority and first-generation students, most of whom have very little information or experience with the process.

- **Educating institutional leaders.** Speaking truth to power can be a risky business, but the best traditions of our community have always insisted that student needs trump those of institutions. As a united community, we can remind school principals, superintendents, school boards, provosts, chancellors, presidents and boards of trustees of that important truth.
• **Price and aid policy.** This is an area of compelling public and legislative interest. All of us must understand the complexities of these issues, the challenges accompanying them, and the possible solutions in areas in which collectively or individually our institutions can improve their performance. In the end, students and families deserve the assurance that they can afford to pursue their educational dreams.

• **Professional standards.** This module will cover expectations and professional norms and standards for school counselors, financial aid officers, and admissions recruiters and counselors. An implicit aspect of this module will be the expectation that each school counselor and admissions professional will know enough about financial aid to be able to discuss it in a useful way with prospective students and that each financial aid officer will understand admissions procedures in a similar way.

• **Rankings and assessments.** We commit to a public dialogue that explores the commercial underpinnings of rankings in higher education. Here the task force contemplates educating the community about rankings, how they are developed, and their weaknesses and strengths. The goal will be to arm the community with the ability to deal with the industry that has grown up around rankings, and to find more meaningful measures of educational quality.

• **System alignment.** This module will address the imperative to align the system, from prekindergarten through college graduation, including pre-school programming in distressed areas, a college-preparatory program as the high school “default” curriculum and seamless transitions from two- to four-year institutions.

• **Testing and its use and abuse.** Our community must insist that tests be used during admissions and institutional marketing efforts in a responsible, ethical and professional manner. This module will remind the profession of best practice in this area.

2. **As signers of this document, we commit our individual institutions to reviewing their practices, policies, statements and messages against the 10-part statement of values outlined above.** We ask every school and every college and university in the United States to join us in this effort. The intent should be to make sure that schools and campuses are as transparent as possible in their counseling, admissions and financial aid processes, and that they pursue the principles of best practice ethically and professionally.

3. **We commit to making our practices as inclusive as possible, recognizing the many ways in which this generation of students represents an entirely new demographic in the school-to-college transition.** Several consequences flow from this new reality:

• **We should ensure that outreach from institutions of higher education touches students, parents and counselors at EVERY high school throughout the country.** Many affluent high schools are overwhelmed with admissions visitors, while schools in low-income areas rarely see higher education representatives. The admissions community has an obligation to develop and implement strategies that will reach every high school with programs that inspire and inform students, their families and counselors regarding the importance of higher education and the pathways to admissions, financial aid and college success. This effort will require creativity and greater collaboration and cooperation among our institutions. Community receptions, joint presentations by several institutions, and evening and
weekend programming that include parents are among the strategies that can be implemented. It is also imperative that admissions staff members who visit schools be trained not just to “recruit” for their own institutions, but also to provide encouraging, consistent and inclusive messages regarding preparation for college success and the variety of higher education opportunities available. Admissions representatives should serve as agents for college access by demystifying the college admissions and financial aid processes. Their role is broader than that of a recruiter — it is that of an educator.

- **We must develop bilingual approaches.** The number of Hispanic and Latino students attending high school is likely to more than double in the next 10 years. The community should immediately begin to develop bilingual materials and recruiters to make it easier for these students and their families to access the information they need.

- **We should aim to reduce complexity and demystify the process.** For all applicants, but particularly for first-generation applicants, there is a compelling need to reduce the complexity of the admissions and financial aid processes. Some of that is beyond our control, but the profession can do a great deal to simplify the transition. All institutions could do more to employ a common application and adhere to common deadline dates. Colleges and universities that practice open admission or guaranteed admission for students meeting specific requirements should clearly and widely communicate the criteria and the ease of admission to their institutions.

4. **We ask the community to engage leadership at the institutional level (schools and colleges and universities) in discussions about these issues.** School principals and superintendents need to understand the limitations of tests and rankings every bit as much as faculty, deans, provosts and chancellors. The community needs to engage leadership in this discussion and bring the statement of values contained in this document before advisory boards, admissions committees, school boards and boards of trustees.

5. **We ask counselors to commit to genuine college counseling while the task force, for its part, will highlight the need for additional resources to bolster counseling in K-12 education.** Anecdotally, we understand that some counselors are not committed to the essential concept that all students need to be prepared for college. This must change. We challenge counselors to initiate discussions in their schools about the new reality that all students need to be prepared for college and about what that implies for the professional standing of counselors in the school and how their time is used.

At the same time, school counseling loads are extremely high in many districts, which frequently are those districts that enroll students with the greatest needs. The task force intends to push for professionally defensible staffing levels, for the elimination of administrative busywork for school counselors, and for the elevation of lead counselors in the administrative hierarchy of schools.

6. **The task force looks forward to reviewing the recommendations for improving student aid processes recently delivered to the College Board by the Rethinking Student Aid study group.** It is clear that the Rethinking Student Aid project offers recommendations that are designed to simplify the process and make it more predictable and grounded in student need. We support the approach and hope the final recommendations advance these goals.
7. The task force will bring the recommendations in this letter to the attention of the College Board’s Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education, asking the commission to endorse the principles in this document as a first step to encouraging provosts, chancellors and presidents to adopt a new way of thinking about institutional excellence and the school-to-college transition.

Our Profession and Our Institutions at Their Best

In closing this letter, we urge you to take up the challenges it outlines optimistically and in good spirit. Although each of us do many different things, at the end of the day we are all educators. Every hour, our work touches the future. Because it does, we stand on the right side of history and on the right side of America’s best values.

For all of us and for each of you, it is a great privilege to be involved in this work. It helps shape American life. We can be part of a rebirth of the American ideal because the nation’s future and the ability to help shape America’s human potential are what our schools, colleges and universities are all about. These are the issues that we as educators can take up and make our own. It is in respecting individual dignity, nurturing the struggling dream of America and encouraging the life of the mind through the entire spectrum of human knowledge — from science and technology to music and the arts — that American hopes for the future will either rise or fall.

Ignoring that tradition, it is hard to know how we can succeed; respecting it, we cannot fail.
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Appendix A

Summary of Selected Data on
P-20 Education in America

The College Board’s Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century developed a data book to use as a guide to the task force’s work and as a resource for the College Board’s Commission on Access, Admissions and Success in Higher Education. A comprehensive but not exhaustive review of data on several contemporary issues in American education, the document explores 10 significant indicators of our national educational health. It includes the best national evidence we could find on each of these indicators, such as global competitiveness, children’s well-being, student achievement, and high school and college graduation rates.

Below are the salient data topics related to the 10 indicators that are discussed in greater detail in the full data book, “Selected Data on P-20 Education in America.” This book is available for download from the College Board Web site dedicated to “Preserving the Dream of America: An Open Letter to Professionals in Admissions, Financial Aid and Counseling” and the activities of our task force: www.collegeboard.org/admissionsinthe21stcentury.

1. Economic Competitiveness
2. Educational Attainment
3. Child Well-being
4. Demographics
5. Need for Baccalaureates
6. K-12 and College Finance
7. The Educational Pipeline
8. Standards
9. Teaching
10. STEM Needs
Appendix B

College Board Guidelines

Standardized Admissions Exams: Statement of Responsible Use

1. Standardized test scores are one measure of a student’s cognitive readiness for college.

2. Standardized tests provide a fair and reliable measure of cognitive readiness that substantial academic research demonstrates is a valid predictor of a student’s grades in his or her freshman year in college. As such, standardized test scores can help admissions professionals make fair and informed decisions.

3. However, standardized test scores are just one source of data available for use by admissions professionals in the selection process and their value is contingent upon their appropriate usage.

4. Test scores should always be used in conjunction with other components of a candidate’s portfolio, such as grades in rigorous courses, as well as the candidate’s educational experiences and opportunities.

5. Test scores should only be used as a contemporary and approximate indicator of a student’s preparation for college-level work rather than a fixed or exact measure.

6. Small differences in test scores should not be the basis for rejecting an otherwise qualified applicant.

7. Like all data used in an institution’s admissions process, test scores should be regularly validated to confirm their meaning and relevance within that institution.

8. It is the responsibility of the test providers to prepare and distribute research-based guidelines outlining the proper use of their test scores. Training about the test and proper usage of scores should also be made available for admissions professionals.

9. It is the responsibility of admissions professionals to be knowledgeable of, and to follow, appropriate usage guidelines when using standardized test scores in the selection process.

10. Admissions professionals should review their institution’s test use policies periodically to ensure adherence to appropriate usage guidelines.
Appendix C

Acknowledgments

The members of the Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century are grateful for the help of several people without whom this work could not have been completed.

We want to acknowledge the seminal contribution of Fred Dietrich, senior adviser to the president of the College Board, who first conceived of the need to explore contemporary conditions influencing the school-to-college transition. With the advice of the College Board’s Guidance and Admission Assembly Council, Fred’s initial conception was broadened into the establishment of this task force. We thank the College Board for its generous support of the task force. College Board President Gaston Caperton understood the importance of this effort from the outset and supported it enthusiastically.

The chairman of the task force wants to note the outstanding work of the task force members in moving this effort forward. This was a large group, representing many different views and constituencies, and the task force members persevered in a difficult task to develop an agenda to advance the profession.

We are grateful to Fred Dietrich for his ongoing leadership and guidance. We want to thank Bradley J. Quin, executive director of Higher Education Advocacy and Special Initiatives of the College Board, for identifying themes, articulating their significance and developing follow-up plans for the task force. Throughout this work, the task force benefited from the able assistance of David Kellner, events coordinator, who tirelessly attended to the many details involved with organizing meetings over several years and responding to the needs of such a large group.

We benefited greatly from thoughtful readings of this report in draft form by several people. We want, in particular, to thank Tom Rudin, senior vice president for Advocacy, Government Relations and Development, and Christen Pollock, director of Advocacy and Government Relations, for their comments and suggestions.

Finally, we want to thank James Harvey of Seattle for his assistance in capturing the many ideas and passions of a diverse task force and crafting them into a coherent call for action.
Advocacy is central to the work of the College Board. Working with members, policymakers and the education community, we promote programs, policies and practices that increase college access and success for all students. In a world of growing complexity and competing demands, we advocate to ensure that education comes first. www.collegeboard.com/advocacy

To access this report online and learn more about the activities of the Task Force on Admissions in the 21st Century, visit www.collegeboard.com/admissionsinthe21stcentury