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Hiring part-time college application readers

By Elizabeth LaScala

Doing College and Beyond College and Graduate School Admissions Services 970 Dewing Avenue, Suite 202, Lafayette 925.385.0562 (office) 925.330.8801 (mobile) www.doingcollege.com Elizabeth@doingcollege.com Elizabeth LaScala, PhD, brings decades of admissions expertise to personally guide each student through applying to well-matched colleges, making each step more manageable and less stressful. She has placed hundreds of students in the most prestigious colleges and universities in the US. Elizabeth attends conferences, visits campuses and makes personal contacts with admissions networks to stay current on the evolving nature of college admissions. She and her professional team offer resume development, test preparation, academic tutoring, value analysis, merit and need-based scholarship search and more.

With the recent surge in college applications, schools have begun to outsource the work of their admission counseling staff (aka admission officers) by hiring part-time application readers. Colleges tell us that this influx of part-timers is a matter of necessity, but a necessity in large part created and greeted positively by colleges themselves.

How do they create these surges? First, colleges send out tons of `spam' to students encouraging them to apply using the email addresses they purchase from the College Board (makers of the SAT) and ACT, Inc., the ACT test makers. They offer to waive the application fee, compliment the student's achievements (without really knowing about specific achievements) and utilize a variety of other ploys to get students to apply. In addition, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges became test optional to help students apply; everyone who lived through that cycle knows how many test cancellations there were and how difficult it was to find open testing sites. Most of these colleges have continued their test optional policies because they worked! There was a surge in applications last cycle and there promises to be an equal or even greater surge this cycle.

As colleges continue to see growth in the number of applications they receive, more readers are needed to get through the sheer number of them, and most schools claim they cannot afford to hire more full-time admission officers. The University of California at Irvine, for example, expects to hire 200 part-time readers for next year's admission cycle; for comparison, note that they hired 180 last year. Georgia Institute of Technology expects to hire 60 part-timers, while a decade ago they hired as few as three. These hires are external to the school and may consist of former admission officers from other colleges as well as others in education, such as high school teachers.

This hiring trend has been met with controversy. For example, although most admission officers see benefits to part-time readers, some have shown concern. Those in favor of the practice, argue that it allows more applications to be read and reviewed while still maintaining the integrity of the school's admission process. They point to the fact that many schools employ a strict training process for part-time readers. Scott Jaschik at Insider Higher Ed writes, "At University of California - Irvine, new part-time readers first review 20 files from the previous year with senior full-time staff explaining why students were admitted or rejected. Then the new recruits review 10 more applications and explain why they would admit or reject them, with senior staff reviewing their decisions." Additionally, when the part-time readers arrive at a conclusion, they are taken as recommendations rather than de facto acceptances or rejections, with full-time admission officers making the final call. To avoid conflicts of interests, part-timers also do not review applicants from their school district, nor do they know the name of the applicant they are reviewing.

However, some admission officers, joined by other higher education voices including independent college advisors like I am, argue that the use of part-time readers may prevent all applicants from getting a fair shot at admission and worry that the practice is becoming increasingly common. Some also are concerned about the transparency of the process - applicants do not know whether their application is being reviewed by an admission officer or a part-time hire, and they certainly do not know how and how well the individual was trained.

The University of California system's process may be the gold standard in training part-time readers, but that tells us little to nothing about how private colleges and other public university systems operate.

Additionally, despite the claim that part-timers only give recommendations, those recommendations might come shortly before the decision deadlines, and could mean that some applicants may not have the benefit of a review by full-time staff. This could result in many applications being reviewed and decided on only by part-time readers.

As it stands, most admission officers seem to be in favor of the process, trusting that their school's administration can hire part-time readers that best suit the needs of the school and avoid any bias in the evaluation of applicants. On the other hand, many college advisors are still decidedly on the fence about this practice and hope to see greater transparency from all colleges and universities who adopt the practice.

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