



Group 1: Admissions Processes at the University of Illinois

Introduction

The University of Illinois annually receives over 22,000 applications from high school students hoping to make the University their home for the next 4 years. Of those 22,000 students, only about 7,000 will be granted admission. That means 68 percent of all the high school students that apply to the University of Illinois will be rejected (Kim). In order to elucidate the admissions process and put to rest some uncertainties and rumors, our team has conducted ethnographic research, as well as compiled accredited published sources to conclude what “really” matters in the admissions process. Members of our research team examined all possible aspects of the admissions process and gained insight from multiple perspectives in order to diversify the information. We first looked at the process from the point of view of high school guidance counselors from different towns in Illinois to determine the impressions of those outside the University. The team then went right to the source and conducted interviews with the deans and assistant deans of two undergraduate colleges which were chosen as a model for the rest of the university – the College of Agricultural Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) and the College of Engineering. This information, along with the published sources, led us to

very specific conclusions about the admissions process. We have concluded that the most important factors in the admissions process are University public relations, competition with other schools around the nation, athletics, and funding allocation. Before this can be fully understood, we must examine the information that led to these conclusions. We will present an overview of the Admissions Process from the University Office of Admissions and Records, examine the admissions process from both the College of ACES and the College of Engineering, and provide a perspective of the admissions process from those outside the University.

Background

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Admissions Process Overview

The first step in the admissions process for a high school student is to choose a specific college at the University of Illinois. There are eight different colleges within the University which include: College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES), College of Applied Life Sciences, Institute of Aviation, College of Business, College of Education, College of Engineering, College of Fine and Applied Arts, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Students are only allowed to apply one time and to only one college (Future Students, 2006).

We have been informed by a representative of the Office of Admissions and Records that when an application arrives at the University, the OAR staff conducts an initial screening of the applications. Admission is granted for outstanding applicants and

those that do not meet requirements are rejected. After this review, the different colleges in the University send their representatives to evaluate students whose entrance or denial can not be immediately determined. These groups, made up of deans and professors, then determine the status of the application in question (personal communication, April 21, 2006).

The University of Illinois evaluates applicants in a variety of areas. They require a certain number of courses taken in high school which include: 4 years of English, 3-3.5 years of mathematics, 2 years of social studies, 2 years of laboratory sciences, 2 years of foreign language, and 2 more years of flexible academic units. These requirements are not flexible for potential students (Future Students, 2006). However, other requirements are flexible and have to be evaluated by the different Colleges.

The University evaluates applicants ACT Composite and/or their SAT I scores. The University also began to accept the writing portion of the ACT this year, but it was optional for students to include it. The majority of accepted University applicants have ACT scores in the range of 27-31. Average (middle 50%) ACT scores of different Colleges vary. For example, the average ACT range of the College of Engineering is between 29-32, compared with the College of ACES, which has an average range between 24-28. These differences will be explored in greater depth later in this paper. The University gives this ACT information on their website to allow prospective students to see where they will fit in among other applicants and current students.¹

Another factor the University examines is high school class rank. 99% of University students are in the top 50% of their graduating class. 80% of accepted applicants are in the top 25% of their high school. One advantage to using class rank in

¹ See Appendix 1

the admissions process is that class rank demonstrates how well a potential student performed compared to their peers. Some high schools may allow for huge grade point average (GPA) inflation compared to other schools; therefore, examining GPA alone does not necessarily indicate the academic performance of a student. One disadvantage to using class rank as a sole indicator of the academic capabilities of a student is variation in the quality of students at a particular high school. The valedictorian at one school may only be in the top 25% of a more competitive school.

Since numbers alone are not always sufficient for admitting students, the University also requires applicants to write two essays with a maximum of 300 words. The first essay is a personal essay that allows applicants to tell more about themselves. The second essay is a professional essay that allows the applicant to explain where the University will fit into their professional and intellectual aspirations. Finally, students applying to the College of Fine and Applied Arts also have to submit a portfolio, perform an audition, or be interviewed (Future Students, 2006). The personal statements are a very important part of the admissions process. These statements allow the reviewers to get to know the person behind all the test scores and grade point averages.

While University standards are consistent, different colleges have their own standards for admission. This is evident in the differences between ACT scores among different colleges. Some colleges may depend more on ACT scores and grades, while others will depend more on the personal statements and interviews. Even different majors within colleges sometimes have different admissions standards (Future Students, 2006). For example, an Accounting major in the College of Business has tougher entrance requirements than a Business Administration major.

Another factor that may affect admissions to the University is an applicant's residency. Only 10% of students are from places other than Illinois. This is the lowest percentage of out-of-state students in the Big Ten Conference. One reason for this discrepancy may be the low number of scholarships available for students, compared to other universities, such as Iowa, Indiana, or Michigan.

Despite a brief personal statement, the University of Illinois admissions process remains somewhat impersonal. Recent changes in the application have reflected an effort to ameliorate this issue. There has been a switch from one essay to two which allows the reviewer to see two sides of the applicant, personal and professional. Another upcoming change will be the inclusion of the new written portion of the ACT. We believe including the written portion of the ACT will further personalize the application.

Case 1: High School Guidance Counselor Impressions

When examining admissions to the University of Illinois, it is good to find an outside perspective from a knowledgeable source. We conducted an interview of a high school guidance counselor at Libertyville High School. Libertyville is located 40 miles north of Chicago and averages 25 students per year that attend the University of Illinois. The counselor interviewed was Joseph Cragan, who has worked at Libertyville for the past five years. He said that there are specific reasons why different colleges within the University of Illinois have different requirements and restrictions. The demographic and geographic make-up of the applicant pool is one of the reasons he gave for variation between colleges in the admissions process (Personal communication, 4/16/06). If a large number of students from a certain area in the state apply, it might cause the

reviewers to become more selective for those particular applicants. This selectivity helps diversify the University and gives students from different backgrounds regions a better opportunity to be admitted. Cragan also said that the reviewers have influence on which type of students are admitted (Personal communication, 4/16/06). This statement was interpreted to mean that each reviewer carries inherent biases that could affect the outcome of the process.

When asked about the recommendations he makes to his students, he said that he tells his students to, “Go for it! It is worth a shot and there are too many variables in the application process for me determine who is going to be admitted (Personal communication, 4/16/06).” He believed that there are a number of factors that reviewers consider. For example, Cragan mentioned the sports a student played, the clubs they were associated with, any volunteer work and activities outside of school are important. He also believes that strong extracurricular activities may help the application of a potential student stand out more than a good GPA and a good personal statement alone. (Personal Communication, 4/16/06). These statements are another example of how difficult it is to examine the actual admissions process from the outside.

Cragan also had some advice for students that may not meet the minimum requirements for admittance (i.e. test scores and Grade Point Average). He said that when students come to him with credentials that may not meet the standards, he recommends they consider attending a Junior College. This way, he said, students that may not be as prepared or ready for such an esteemed institution as the University of Illinois can better prepare themselves. Junior College also gives them the opportunity to explore different outlets and strengthen their core of knowledge. Cragan also said the

popularity of Junior College has increased as students have started to realize how competitive admission to the University of Illinois and other prestigious institutions has become (Personal communication, 4/16/06).

Cragan mentioned he has noticed changes in the applications acceptance rates in recent years. These changes are not only occurring here at the University of Illinois. Around the country schools are receiving more applications and are becoming ever more selective with applications. Due to these changes, students and parents are looking for outside help and advice. In an article published in the *News and Observer* by Jane Ruffin, there is a list of things to do to help one prepare for applying to major Universities. Major emphasis in the article is placed on planning ahead and doing research on the colleges one might want to attend. Ruffin states that even in junior high school, students might want to start planning for college. When Cragan was asked when he advises his students to start planning he said, "As soon as they walk into my office freshman year (Personal communication, 4/16/06)." He said that lately, the students he sees that apply to the University of Illinois have been planning to attend from the start (Personal communication, 4/16/06). Because applications and transcripts are being examined so far in the past, Cragan believes it is not surprising to see students preparing for college in junior high school. This added pressure and competition may cause university admissions to become even more selective in the future.

Case 2: College of ACES (Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences)

Admissions Process

Process Overview

The admissions process for College of ACES is a combined effort between the College and the Office of Admissions and Records. The first person that sees the application after the student sends it is a screener from the OAR. The screener examines the application and decides whether the applicant has all requirements met for admission to the college. According to Wayne Banwart, Interim Associate Dean of the College of ACES, the applications are divided up into three “piles” by the screeners – “definitely yes,” “definitely no,” and “maybe” (Personal communication, April 12, 2006). The “definitely yes” pile has gone above and beyond all requirements and is a highly qualified candidate. The “definitely no” pile is either missing a basic requirement for admission such as ACT/SAT test score, class rank, personal statement, etc...or has a major deficiency in another aspect of the application. Then there is the “maybe” pile, which is the largest of the piles and consists primarily of applicants who meet all requirements, but need to be subject to further review. This pile is actually given the assistant deans of the College of ACES, who will make the final decision for each applicant.

There are three important aspects of an application that a reviewer will take into account: ACT scores, high school rank, and the statement of interest, which is most important. According to Mr. Banwart, the reason the statement of interest is so important is because this gives the best insight into a student’s personality. It also allows a reviewer

to determine if this student has proper motivation, and will make an appropriate fit in the college community (Personal communication, April 12, 2006).

Another important aspect to take into account when determining who to admit is the allotted class size for the upcoming year. This number is given to deans of the college from the director of the Office of Admissions and Records, who was given a target from the provost. According to Banwart, for the past 15 years, the number has been set at 900 acceptances, in order to have an incoming class size of 625 freshmen (personal communication, April 12, 2006). In practice, this number may fluctuate by small amounts from year to year, but has remained fairly constant. This is due to the fact that in the years past the matriculation rate is near 66% of admitted students.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The admission process to the College of ACES, barring the personal statement, has become so automatic and impersonal that it seems as if the majority of it can be performed by machines using a computer algorithm. For example, the computer might say “Does student X have G.P.A. above 3.2, if yes send see A.C.T., if no denied. Does student X have A.C.T. above 27, if yes send to deans, if no denied...” This type of procedure is good because it makes the process seem fair to all, and it removes all subjectivity until the personal statement is read. However, at the same time, it may be detrimental to students with special circumstances who may have a good reason for a lower G.P.A. or A.C.T. score. If student X had a great G.P.A. but had the stomach flu during the A.C.T. he/she may not make it past the initial screening process and a highly qualified student will be sent home without a fair chance. The remainder of the process

involves considering the personal statement and other such elements. This review is a crucial step because it gives a real life look at the students and allows the screener to determine whether the student will make a good fit in the college.

Case 3: College of Engineering Admissions Process

Process Overview

The College of Engineering admissions process at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a relatively simple, but highly selective process. Each potential student must complete the standardized application for entry to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Before even being considered for entry into the individual departments of the College of Engineering, each applicant must meet a certain minimum set of requirements that vary only slightly between the different colleges of the University.

For the College of Engineering, the minimum application requirements are as follows:

1. 4 years of English coursework
2. 3.5 years of Mathematics coursework
3. 2 years of Social Studies coursework
4. 2 years of Lab Science coursework
5. 2 years of One Foreign Language
6. 2 Flexible Academic credits

In addition to these minimum high school credit requirements, the College of Engineering also examines the ACT or SAT scores for the potential student as well as the high school rank of that student. For freshmen entering the College of Engineering for the Fall semester of 2005, the composite average of their ACT scores was 30.25, the

average of the SAT scores was between 1300 – 1450, and the average high school percentile rank was 89.35 (“College of Engineering Facts”, 2006). Once the application is received, it is sorted and processed by the University Office of Admissions and Records. If a student has an extremely strong application, that student will be admitted without the approval of the College of Engineering administration. In the same manner, if a potential student is significantly below the application standards, then their application will be rejected without approval by the College of Engineering. One of the Assistant Deans for the College of Engineering, Bruce Litchfield, will collaborate with the University Office of Admissions and Records to review the remaining undecided applications. When reviewing the undecided applications, the team first examines academic performance of the potential students. An outstanding academic performance almost always guarantees admittance to the College of Engineering. If a student is not as strong academically, other factors such as extracurricular involvement and the Personal and Professional Essays become much more important factors in determining admittance. If after this review the admittance of a student is still debatable, often the application will be reviewed by a group of Assistant and Associate Deans from the College of Engineering before a final decision is made (personal communication with Bruce Litchfield, April 27, 2006). This is the overall process of admittance for the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The College of Engineering admissions process is very objective concerning academic performance and academic history for an applicant. This objectivity may be a strength for students who are academically superior. However, the objectivity toward

academics may also be a weakness in that the process may eliminate candidates who could offer more talents to the College of Engineering than simply high academic performance. This high focus on academics, compared to other factors, is consistent with many elite engineering programs throughout the country as well (Toor, 118). If strong academic traits are not demonstrated on an application, then the process of admission to the College of Engineering becomes very subjective. Other parts of the application, such as extra-curricular activities and the personal essays, become much more important. However, because each individual reviewer from the College of Engineering may interpret the same writing differently, the applications may not be judged equally. All the administrators for the College of Engineering may agree on the student qualities that are important for admission, but then each may individually have different opinions on how those qualities are best demonstrated. Accordingly, Bruce Litchfield explained that in reviewing the subjective parts of the application, the administration is looking for qualities that ensure the potential student will be able to grow, learn, and thrive in the College of Engineering at Urbana- Champaign (personal communication, April 27, 2006). This subjectivity on this level of the College of Engineering admission process can be a strength for potential students because each will be viewed more as an individual. However, this subjectivity can also be a weakness because of the inequality among reviewers concerning how students may demonstrate important non-academic qualities.

Changes Over Time

The College of Engineering admissions process has undergone several changes in the past few years. The most significant change in the process has been the amount of

information available to potential students about entrance requirements and in the intended interpretation of the information that remains. In the past, the College of Engineering posted the exact requirements for admission to each department. According to Assistant Dean Bruce Litchfield, as long as the students met the requirements as posted, then they could be almost certain to be admitted (personal communication, April 12, 2006). In the last few years, the College of Engineering has vastly reduced the amount of specific information available about “norms” for admissions to its departments. The change signals a widespread effort by the College of Engineering to deal with outside pressures as numbers of applications continue to rise. More people must be denied admission now than in the past; therefore, the College of Engineering has to be much more subjective in the admission process.

Body

Does Funding Affect Admissions at the University of Illinois?

In examining the issues affecting admission to the University of Illinois, we found that funding and grant money had the most complex relationship to admissions. An individual unfamiliar with admissions to the University may believe that funding is directly related to admissions – more money equates to more students admitted. However, this logic is flawed and other important factors need to be considered. As Wayne Banwart described, two major renovations central to the College of ACES – The Institute for Genomic Projects, and Christopher Hall were recently erected. The state of Illinois provided a 70 million dollar grant for the Institute for Genomics, and private

funding was given for the construction of Christopher Hall. These substantial additions to the College of ACES have had no significant effect on admissions to the College (Personal communication April 12, 2006). The reason behind this accurately reflects how the majority of University funding relates to admissions.

According to Banwart, when an academic department receives funding, most often it is for the purposes of research, as with Christopher Hall, which studies family resiliency and dynamics. Similarly, the Institute for Genomic Projects is a center for studying the human genome and disease, mainly catering to research projects (Personal communication April 12, 2006). The extra money and new facilities does not mean more students can be admitted automatically. Instead, the effect is much more indirect. When a specific department receives a huge grant or private funding, it may attract faculty from another University who are looking to be a part of the cutting edge in their field. This may take many years however, and is a very gradual process. In time, the new faculty may in turn, attract more applicants who have become aware of the rising quality of faculty, and greater research opportunities. If the applicant pool becomes significantly larger and more competitive, the department will need more seats and will then appeal to the University. The appeal will likely consist of a request for a new building to accommodate the extra students, which of course means lots of money is needed. By the time the funding actually does trickle down from the state or private grant, if at all, the students and staff may not even remember the cause for the jump in admissions in the first place.

Besides the ability of funding to trickle down into faculty, staff, graduate students, and eventually undergraduate students, funding for buildings and research has other effects on the admissions process as well. The College of Engineering tends to place importance on funding new building construction and maintaining excellent laboratory facilities. According to Assistant Dean Bruce Litchfield, visiting students touring the engineering campus are very impressed (personal communication, April 27, 2006). Leaving with a good impression of the campus can be a powerful determinant for a student still undecided on which university to attend.

The importance most colleges in the University of Illinois place on committing funding to new buildings and research facilities has unwanted complications for the admissions process as well. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign does not offer many merit-based grants or scholarships for potential students. Most of the potential students are offered financial aid assistance in the form of student loans. However, the lack of scholarships can become a competitive disadvantage to recruiting top students and underrepresented students who are being courted by multiple prestigious universities. If a student has been admitted to another university with an offer for a full-ride (or even half-ride) scholarship, and the University of Illinois does not offer any assistance other than student loans, that student may choose to go to the school that makes the better scholarship offer. Until merit-based grants and scholarships become a priority for fund allocation at the University of Illinois, the issues of competitive recruiting of top students and underrepresented students will remain.

Do Public Relations affect Admissions at the University of Illinois?

What are Public Relations and why are they important?

“Public relations are communications and actions aimed at earning public understanding and acceptance. Public relations may be used to maintain a positive image and educate the public about the (institution’s) goals and objectives”(Preis, 2006).² Public relations can help “to introduce new products and support sales” as well (Preis, 2006). This text has been written in reference to a corporation or business. We can apply this definition to the University of Illinois when we examine the University as an institution and as a business.

In order to survive, the University of Illinois must constantly attract new students and faculty. If the University wants to be successful at attracting people to attend and work, they must effectively “market” the institution. Undoubtedly, the University wants to maintain a positive image in the community and across the country. One of the only ways the University of Illinois interacts with those outside its educational community is through public relations. News stories, research publications, and open houses are some of the more obvious examples of public relations that the University of Illinois employs. However, when considering public relations and its important effects on the University, we must remember more subtle but even more powerful examples. Successful athletic programs are one of the most subtle but most powerful positive public relations ventures for the University of Illinois. Because of the dependence of the University on effective marketing to guarantee growth and prosperity, we would argue that public relations is one of the most important external factors to affect the admissions process at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

² This definition of public relations comes from a course notes packet used for a class on basic marketing techniques offered at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.[0]

How do Public Relations affect the University of Illinois admissions?

As discussed above, successful athletic programs can be a very powerful positive public relations agent. In the year 2005, college basketball fans across the nation were touched by “Illini Basketball Fever”. The UIUC Men’s Basketball team of was the number one team in the country for 17 straight weeks and looked untouchable. The season culminated in a magical run to all the way to the school’s first ever NCAA National Championship game. The University of Illinois has seen the largest crop of applications this year in the school’s history. We do not believe this is a coincidence at all. The same situation occurred at Duke University following successful years of their Men’s Basketball program. Bruce Litchfield of the College of Engineering openly stated that he believed one of the major factors explaining a spike in the application numbers this year is due to the success of the Men’s Basketball team in 2005 (personal communication, April 12, 2006). Very few programs at the University of Illinois can reach such a wide and diverse audience as a successful Men’s Basketball team.

Another set of powerful, but sometimes overlooked, public relations ventures by the University are the college ranking and information books printed each year by independent reviewers. The books and reviews are used by high school students and parents all over the country to compare schools and to highlight strengths and weaknesses of different institutions. In the 2006 edition of “Kiplinger’s Personal Finance”, the University of Illinois ranks eighth on the list of the “100 Best Values in Public Colleges”. The University of Illinois has also been as ranked as one of the top 10 public national universities by the “2005 U.S. News and World Report College Guide”. Being a great value and a top public research university are both vitally important qualities of the

University of Illinois. However, without public relations efforts and campaigns such as these independent reviews, people in the larger community of our nation and world would never know. If the message is communicated effectively, as it has been in both of these reports, the University of Illinois can attract many more people to want to go to school here. Bruce Litchfield cites the “100 Best Values in Public Colleges” report as having possibly affected admission numbers this year as well (personal communication, April 12, 2006).

Still another form of public relations that influences admissions at the University of Illinois is the success of researchers. The University of Illinois employs some of the top minds in the world to research and develop new technologies and ideas. Last year, two University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign professors were awarded Nobel prizes for their important scientific contributions. Research success stories such as these Nobel Laureates resound in academic and professional communities around the globe. This generates more research investment and in turn, more faculty and graduate student researchers. With more faculty and graduate student staff, the University is able to offer a wider variety of courses and a greater number of sections. This allows the University to admit more students to future classes to help contribute to the growth and prosperity of the University of Illinois. Through almost a “trickle down” method, the success of University researchers can profoundly affect admissions.

Future of Admissions at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The admissions processes at the University of Illinois have rapidly changed over the past several years. A more stringent approach to the application process and an increase in the

number of applications from year to year is making it more difficult to gain admittance to the University of Illinois. In the next few years the University is hoping to decrease its number of acceptances and its overall student body population. After receiving a record number of applications this year, the University is going to have to turn away more potential students to try and create more evenly populated classes. To avoid overpopulating next year's freshman class--as this year's class was 400 over goal amount--the University of Illinois created the largest waiting list in school history. With about 1,100 names on the list, the University will let these students know if they will be admitted after they determine the number of fall acceptances (Newbart 1, 2006). University officials have new ideas and policies that they would like to install in the near future that may affect the admissions process. University administration has discussed ideas such as raising tuition by an astounding 60 percent, reducing overall enrollment by up to 2,000 students, increasing the number of foreign freshman students by about 200, and adding about 500 spots for community college transfer students (Newbart 2, 2006).

These new goals may have both positive and negative affects on the University of Illinois admissions process. Adding 500 openings for community college transfer students may benefit many of the high school students whose grades and test scores were not strong enough to grant immediate admission to the University. As highlighted in our interview with a high school guidance counselor, many students with lower scores and weaker applications are being counseled to begin their collegiate careers at a junior college. The goal to increase the number of nonresident students has been met with mixed reactions. These out-of-state students, paying a higher tuition rate, could help provide the University with money the institution will lose because of the decreased

enrollment goal (Newbart 2, 2006). This apparent direct link to increased funding has angered many rejected students and their parents. They feel that they might have been dismissed in order to accommodate a nonresident student who would pay more for tuition. The President of the University of Illinois, Joseph White, states that this is not the case. He claims that money is not a factor that is taken into consideration when deciding on whether to accept more nonresident students. He says that the increased nonresident student goal has been created to enrich the experiences of the University of Illinois students by coming into contact with a more diverse student population (Newbart 2, 2006). By increasing the number of non-resident students, the University administration is hoping the atmosphere on campus will change and will most likely broaden the horizons of experience and ideals for many students.

The goals presented above seem to demonstrate that the University of Illinois is attempting to strengthen its reputation. The University wants to be known as a prestigious institution of higher learning with the best students and faculty. It wants to provide an environment that enriches the lives of those attending and working. The University of Illinois wants to be seen as a premier college and wants to compete with the best schools in the world. When University officials published its 96 page admissions report, the main objective of the plan is, “to compete for the best student in the state, the nation, and the world (Newbart 2, 2006).” The University of Illinois as an institution is not alone with this goal. The 2005-2006 admissions period has been one of the most competitive seasons ever. “Other top schools, such as Stanford and Brown, faced record numbers of applicants and accepted a smaller share of students than ever before (Chaker, 2006).” Institutions around the country are refining admissions standards and instituting

policies which affect admissions processes. If the University wants to have the best students, then it can only admit the best students. As the University implements the goals presented above, the admissions process will inevitably begin turning away students with above average grades and start only accepting those students who have outstanding grades.

Conclusion

Through our research, we have concluded that the most important factors in the admissions process are University public relations, competition with other schools around the nation, athletics, and funding allocation. We have presented an overview of the admissions process from the University Office of Admissions and Records, examined the admissions process from both the College of ACES and the College of Engineering, and provided a perspective from those outside the University. Our interviews and investigations have shown that, in the future, the University of Illinois will try to attract more competitive applicants and create the atmosphere of a private institution. The long term implications of this shift should continue to be investigated because they will inevitably have both positive and negatives effects on the admissions process.