

FEATURES

Grand goals, hard choices

A former Yale College admissions dean looks back

By [Jeffrey Brenzel](#) | Jan/Feb 2014

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As soon as I stepped into the role of undergraduate admissions dean in 2005, I had to address a series of critical constraints on the process. I quickly discovered that these elements are highly unlikely to change.

First, an unprecedented number of the most talented and highest-achieving students in the world now apply to Yale. In the 30 years separating the Class of 1970 from the Class of 2000, the annual number of applicants increased from about 6,000 to 13,000. In half that same period of time, from the Class of 2000 to the Class of 2015, applications exploded from 13,000 to 27,000. Yale's national and international applicant pool is so rich with every kind of talent, and filled with students so keenly interested in Yale, that we can

command excellence of virtually any kind we wish.

Second, we face the perpetual challenge of competing institutional and societal interests. For eight years, I discussed—or argued about—the admissions process with faculty, students, administrators, alumni, admissions staff, guidance counselors, media critics, social scientists, and perfect strangers. Various of these parties offered reasons that Yale ought to admit either more or fewer of the following: internationals, athletes, legacies, low-income students, middle-class students, rich students, religious students, students of particular racial or ethnic groups, scientists, engineers, public school students, private school students, well-rounded students, quirky students, activists, true scholars, musicians, writers, artists, gay students, straight students, urban students, rural students—and many more types as well. Given competing interests and competing institutional priorities, no constituency will ever be satisfied with admissions outcomes, particularly given that no aspect of an applicant's identity is ever the defining characteristic of his or her Yale application.

Third, secondary school systems throughout the United States and the world present a bewildering variety of contexts. Across all schools, we know that family income and other circumstances of origin determine access to cultural capital, academic preparation, and the generation of a sophisticated application. Therefore, we try always to evaluate whether candidates have performed in truly remarkable ways relative to the opportunities available in their own contexts. It is extremely difficult, however, in the case of any particular individual, to distinguish achievements or challenges attributable primarily to context from those attributable primarily to talent, hard work, and strength of character.

Fourth, although applications contain robust and relevant data—standardized test scores, courses, grades, extracurricular activities, school recommendations, essays, and interviews—candidates typically compile these portfolios between the ages of 14 and 17. They are therefore moving through the most volatile stage of adolescence, not yet acting as independent adults, and many factors relevant to their capacity, intents, and personal character are either not yet measurable or developed. College admissions deans work without a crystal ball and without a net, meaning we are highly vulnerable to the judgments of hindsight.

I cite these facts of life because they necessarily shape our process and its outcomes. Within the context of abundant supply, limited space, conflicting priorities, and uncertain predictions, what is our aim?

Yale's undergraduate admissions office serves one of the world's great colleges, at the heart of one of the world's great research universities. Yale is fundamentally a community of scholars, and Yale College therefore serves to inculcate modes of inquiry and transmit the fruits of inquiry to intellectually gifted, prepared, and ambitious students.

At the same time, we do not admit undergraduates primarily in order to create the next generation of scholars and investigators, though we know that some of our undergraduates will choose these paths and go on to great intellectual distinction. Our superb graduate and professional schools work more directly to accomplish that particular mission, and their selection processes therefore tend to focus more sharply on demonstrated academic accomplishment.

In undergraduate admissions, however, we must also keep before us Yale's longstanding aspiration to cultivate responsible citizens and leaders, graduates who will achieve prominence in the founding or management of enterprises, in public service and public office, in the professions, or in the realms of religion, the arts, and education. By "leaders" I do not mean individuals who succeed merely in achieving high status or high income. To develop leaders means to nurture individuals with superb skills for collaboration, an orientation to service, high levels of creative energy, and the aspirations and character required to make substantive contributions to the common good. Our mandate is to send talented, courageous, and far-sighted people into the global endeavors, organizations, and communities that sorely need them.

With this objective in mind, the Yale admissions office has for some decades reflected on the priority we put on diversity in admissions with respect to socioeconomic background, ethnicity, national origin, gender identity, skills and talents, beliefs and aspirations. Some critics have argued that selective admissions processes amount to little more than the reproduction of social elites, who increasingly distance themselves from the disadvantaged. Critics level this charge despite the fact that Yale and its closest peers provide the most generous financial aid in the world, based entirely on demonstrated family need, and despite the fact that the very most selective institutions are also typically the most diverse, both racially and socioeconomically, among all selective private colleges.

We place a high priority on diversity because it matters to a Yale education. Students learn a great deal from intense and repeated exposure to differences. If we suppose that a liberal arts education aims primarily at imparting the ability to think critically, then we must take into account the fact that differences in experience, background, and identity deeply affect our most strongly held beliefs about the world and each other. When he gave his 2006 freshman address as dean of Yale College, President Peter Salovey '86PhD summarized research showing that students from different cultures and countries perceive similar experiences and narratives in surprisingly different ways. (See president.yale.edu/thinking-new-ways.)

Not every individual exposed to such differences will become adequately aware of his or her own assumptions and partial understandings. However, it is hard to see how any individual with no direct exposure to difference could even begin to do so. To think critically is not just to raise doubts and take issue with what others have said or done, but also to question the basis and foundation for one's own deepest convictions. In addition, a high degree of diversity in classrooms and residential colleges enriches discussions, sparks consideration of new ideas, and broadens the reach of friendships.

In short, we must prepare students for a world that demands they cross boundaries of every kind, working closely with diverse colleagues in unpredictable and highly dynamic global environments. We will fall short in this task unless we educate them accordingly. Diversity and excellence at Yale have become deeply intertwined because they have become so deeply intertwined in a globalized society.

How does an admissions dean strive to attain these goals in the context of the constraints and competing interests that affect the admissions process? I can only speak for myself, of course, now that I am no longer the dean. I thought my job was to assemble the most diverse possible collection of students who had demonstrated truly extraordinary potential in their own contexts and who, when exposed to Yale's resources and to each other, would make lifelong contributions to the common good. I tried to bring students here who would get the most out of the experience and in turn give the most back, to each other and to the world.

My way of thinking about the task resonates with a quality that I believe distinguishes Yale, even among the handful of colleges we recognize as close peers. In both my admissions role and in my personal experience here as a student, alumni director, teacher, dean, and residential college master, I have always been struck by the profound sense of community that Yale fosters and sustains in its graduates, faculty, and staff. The Yale community will never be entirely harmonious, but my hope is that we learn here to treasure the goods that are only available to full citizens in a collaborative, supportive, and thriving community.

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