STUDENT SEARCH: THOSE SELECTED AND THOSE OVERLOOKED

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals that the frequency with which a high school student is selected through search by colleges and universities is determined not only by academic achievement but also by demographics such as residence, gender and ethnicity. Interactions among selection variables make the student search a complex process for institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of schools introducing themselves to prospective students via direct mail began over 50 years ago with proprietary colleges renting lists of student names and contact information and sending them promotions. In the late '60s and early '70s, NRCCUA™, the College Board®, and ACT® began to provide lists of students to non-profit public and private colleges and universities. These list providers offered institutions a convenient method of targeting students based on academic profile and geographic information. Over the years, institutions of all types have come to use this methodology to target the student populations they desire to make up their student body. Typical selection criteria include GPA or test score range as well as career interest and geography.

Oftentimes, students are the first to make contact by requesting information from colleges and universities based on awareness of the school through a variety of sources such as high school counselors, parents, friends, and guidebooks. Other factors that may spur a student-initiated contact include exposure to the institution through general media coverage of athletic teams, youth camps, and advertising. These students are placed in a database, known as the inquiry pool, and the path toward application begins.

If a college/university is to reach its enrollment goals, it must begin with a pool of interested high school student inquirers that is appropriately profiled and is large enough to survive the inevitable reduction in numbers as students move closer to enrollment. But in many cases, the number of inquirers generated by student-initiated first contact is not sufficient to populate what is typically called the "admissions funnel" (Figure A). In such cases, the colleges or universities must reach out to potential students, inviting them to learn more about what their institution has

to offer. This effort to expand an inquiry pool is known as student search. Student search is also a tool that is used to shape the profile of an incoming freshman class.

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One challenge of managing the admissions funnel is in projecting conversion rates and yields as students move through the various phases of the inquiry, application, and enrollment process. The greater the loss factors, the higher the number of inquiries required to meet enrollment goals, and the more important the student search process becomes to the viability of the institution.

NRCCUA (www.nrccua.org) distributed its first nationwide survey in 1972, and has provided student information to college/university members on a continual basis since that time. Its members represent all parts of the higher education spectrum, from large, state universities to small, private, religious colleges. Serving over 1,200 institutions, NRCCUA is the largest provider of student-submitted search information with a database of nearly five million students. The majority of NRCCUA client members are private institutions.

NRCCUA provided its database of 2002-2003 high school seniors to Maguire Associates (www.maguireassoc.com) -- an educational research and consulting firm who has served over 350 colleges and universities around the country with in-depth market research, branding efforts, strategic and tactical planning, financial aid awarding, and communications planning and testing -- for exploration of overall trends and subgroup comparisons. The analysis focuses on answering the following questions:

1. Are some students being under-selected by colleges and universities?
2. Are some students being over-selected by colleges and universities?
3. What interactions exist between key selection variables?
4. What opportunities and challenges exist for colleges and universities in defining their search parameters?

METHOD

Data available through the NRCCUA Talent Identification Program® are gathered directly from students through a national distribution of its Post-Secondary Planning Survey™ to high schools across the country. Teachers and counselors participate in the program by having their students fill out the survey forms and returning them to NRCCUA. Students are also able to complete the survey online and as a part of in-school informational seminars that focus on college preparation.

NRCCUA distributes its Post-Secondary Planning Survey™ to over 20,000 high schools, effectively reaching the vast majority of secondary schools in every part of the United States. Of these schools, approximately one-quarter are privately operated and the remainder are public institutions. While survey information is received throughout the year, the majority of surveys are returned during the fall semester.

The surveys are shipped to high school teachers, counselors and administrators who then provide them to students in their regular classrooms, in the counselor's office, or in special assemblies.

Completion of the survey by the student is voluntary and done for the purpose of receiving information from colleges, universities and other educationally oriented organizations. Information can be updated or removed from the system by written student request at any time. Additional surveys are collected online from individual students who may have missed completing the survey in their school.

The data for our analysis are limited to a group of students who completed the NRCCUA Post-Secondary Planning Survey in the fall of their sophomore year and who expected to graduate high school in 2003. As the data was provided to Maguire Associates in early spring 2003, these students could have been selected by colleges and universities in their sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school.

Data gathered through the NRCCUA survey includes address information used for contacting the student and basic demographic variables such as gender, and ethnic background. The instrument also requests information on the students' educational achievements in high school and their educational plans, preferences, and interests. Also provided to Maguire Associates is a score that indicates the number of times each student was selected by a college or university for a search list. This can be used as a proxy for general interest among member colleges and universities in a given student.

Exhibit 1 at the end of this document shows that the 277,025 high school seniors in the final data set are fairly representative of the general population of 15-19 year olds across the states. Exhibit 2 further profiles the students in the sample by gender, ethnicity, "attributed" household income[1], high school grade point average, and type of school.

KEY FINDINGS

The student selection scores include selections made by private institutions, public institutions, proprietary schools, and other educational organizations. The vast majority of student selections are made by private institutions. Due to the predominance of private college or university selections, further analysis of the data by Maguire Associates focuses on student search selections by private institutions.

Profiles of Most and Least Selected Students

The number of times students have been selected by private colleges and universities ranges from 0 to 135. Selection scores are broken into quartiles to profile the most and least selected students:

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[1] NRCCUA uses a comprehensive consumer database and relevant U.S. Census Bureau data to assign an "attributed" household income to each student in the database. Households within a given carrier route are assigned to an income category using the distribution of incomes within that area based on known and attributed actual income levels. The attributed actual income levels are calculated using an algorithm that includes characteristics such as new car purchase history, family size and structure, housing type, home ownership, head of household occupation, etc.

The most selected students more often report a B+ or higher high school GPA (79%), are female (62%), and are White/Caucasian or Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander (67%). Compared to students who are less often selected, they also more often have an "attributed" household income of $50,000 or more (51%) and attend a private high school (17%).

Least selected students are more often B- or lower students (71%), male (57%), and have "attributed" household incomes of less than $50,000 (80%). They are also more often Black/African American, Latino, and American Indian (28%) and less likely to attend a private high school (3%). While these profiles are generally accurate, analyzing the data in greater depth reveals a more complicated depiction with sizeable interactions among selection variables.

Selection Scores by High School Grade Point Average

As expected, there is a strong direct relationship between selection scores and grade point average (see Figure B).

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Further analysis reveals that students' self-reported high school grade point averages interact with many other variables in the data:

- Female students report higher GPAs on average than do male students.
- Students who live in areas with higher "attributed" incomes also report higher grade point averages.
- Asian and Caucasian/White students report higher GPAs than do other ethnic groups.
- Students who attend private high schools tend to report higher grade point averages.
- Students who aspire to attend a private college/university tend to report higher grade point averages than those who aspire to a state college/university, community/junior college, or trade/technical school.
- Among students who prefer a college or university with a conservative campus environment (in terms of social behavior rules), high percentages are 'A' and 'A+' students. Among those who prefer a liberal environment, high percentages are 'B' or lower students.

Given these interactions, the effect of students' grade point averages was assessed in each of the analyses that follow. All findings reported are maintained even when controlling for students' high school grade point averages.

Selection Scores by "Attributed" Household Income

Not surprisingly, selection scores are directly related to the "attributed" household income of the area in which students reside: selection scores tend to go up as income increases (Figure C).

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Further analysis reveals that "attributed" household income interacts with many other variables. For instance, White/Caucasian and Asian students tend to have higher "attributed" incomes, while Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic/Chicano, and American Indian/Alaskan Native have lower incomes. Students who attend private high schools and want to attend private colleges/universities also tend to have higher "attributed" household incomes.

Given the size of the effect, the impact of "attributed" household income was assessed in each of the following analyses. Similar to GPA, all findings reported are maintained even when accounting for income levels.

Selection Scores by Gender

In general, female students are selected more often than male students (24 and 19 average times, respectively). Other differences between males and females were examined. As stated previously, females tend to report higher high school grade point averages than their male counterparts. Males much more often would like to attend trade/technical schools, while females more often lean towards private colleges and universities and, to a lesser degree, state colleges/universities and community/junior colleges. Females also tend to lean towards denominational colleges more often than men. While both males and females tend to most often prefer a moderate campus environment, a higher percentage of females than males prefer a conservative environment and a higher percentage of males than females prefer a liberal environment. Males are more interested in studying computer science, engineering, and architecture, while females are more interested in medicine, nursing, psychology, teaching, and child care and development.

Selection Scores by High School Type

Students who attend private high schools are selected more often than those who attend public schools, with Catholic high school students being most frequently selected (41), followed by private (25), Christian (25), and public (20). Figure D illustrates that when "attributed" household income is held constant, students who attend Catholic high schools are selected more often than are those who attend other types of high schools across income levels.

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Selection Scores by Ethnicity

Asian and Caucasian students are more often selected than students of other ethnicities (Figure E).

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Selection Scores by Geography

Students living in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states (i.e., New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, District of Columbia) tend to be over-selected compared to

students from other regions (Figure F).[2] Geographic comparisons reveal good concordance between the distribution of private colleges and universities in the U.S. and NRCCUA member institutions. This particularly reflects the relatively large number of private colleges and universities in New England and Mid-Atlantic states compared with the available high school student population in these regions.

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Selection Scores by Preferred Type of Institution

Students who prefer to attend a private college/university (36) are selected more often than are those who prefer to attend a state college/university, community/junior college, or trade/technical school (20, 7, and 6, respectively). Even though students who prefer to attend a private institution tend to report higher GPAs and reside in areas with higher "attributed" incomes, they continue to be selected more often even when grade point average and income are separately held constant.

Selection Scores by Preferred Denomination of College/University

Students who prefer to attend Jewish (31), Catholic (30), Presbyterian (30), Evangelical (30), Interdenominational (29), Lutheran (28), and Episcopal (27) institutions tend to be more often selected.

Selection Scores by Preferred Campus Environment

Students who prefer a moderate campus environment (23) are more often selected than those who prefer a conservative or liberal environment (20 and 17, respectively).

Model to Predict Private College/University Selection Scores

In sum, despite the significant interactions between the demographic and preferential variables, direct relationships do exist among all of the preceding factors and students' selection scores. In order to further assess these independent relationships, several variables were entered into multiple regression analysis to build a model predicting private college/university selection scores. Figure G shows the results of this analysis. It shows that students are more often selected by private colleges and universities if they are female, White/Caucasian, report a high school GPA of B+ or higher, prefer to attend a private college or university, have an "attributed" income of $50,000 or higher, attend a private high school, and prefer to attend a college with a moderate campus environment and not a conservative one.

This analysis was repeated for students within each of the six regions of residence noted in Figure F. Within each region, similar models were found to predict the private college/university

[2] New England includes CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, and VT. Mid-Atlantic group includes DE, DC, MD, NJ, NY, and PA. South includes AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, and VA. Southwest includes AR, NM, OK, and TX. Midwest includes IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WV, and WI. West includes AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, and WY.

selection scores with one exception: ethnicity was not included in the model in the New England region.

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DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Finding 1 -- Overall, female students are selected more often than male students by private colleges and universities.

Given that many institutions are struggling with a gender imbalance that favors female students, this is a surprising finding and represents a real opportunity for colleges and universities. It is unlikely that private institutions are purposefully biasing their search lists against male students; however, gender may not be a variable that institutions consider when specifying criteria for their search lists. In addition, the existence of interactions between gender and the other demographic, academic, and preferential variables reveals that institutions need to think multi-dimensionally when they define their search criteria. For instance, since females tend to report higher high school GPAs than their male counterparts, a search list that is primarily driven by a grade point average cutoff will likely be biased in favor of women. Female students also seem to favor: 1) private colleges and universities, 2) a campus environment with moderate or conservative behavior rules, and 3) specific areas of study that are less technology oriented such as medicine, nursing, psychology, teaching, and child care and development.

In short, if they do not do so already, institutions should at least consider gender in their search criteria. If institutional leaders do not want to actively define the gender breakdown of their search lists, they should at least be aware of interactions that may affect the gender distribution of their final list, since student search is often an important supplement to student-initiated inquiries at the top of the admissions funnel.

Finding 2 -- White/Caucasian and Asian students are being selected more often than are other ethnic groups.

Given that many institutions struggle to achieve ethnic diversity in their student body, this also is a surprising finding. Controlling for high school GPA and "attributed" household income did not eradicate the ethnic differences in selection scores. For example, even among students who live in areas with "attributed" incomes of $100,000 or higher, Asian and White/Caucasian students are more often selected than are Latino/Hispanic/Chicano, Black/African American, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students.

As is the case with gender, private institutions are not purposefully biasing their search lists against certain ethnic groups; however, ethnicity may not be a variable that institutions consider when specifying their search criteria. This represents a real opportunity for colleges and universities, as Latino/Hispanic/Chicano, Black/African American, and American Indian/Alaskan Native 'A-' or higher students are found to be less often selected than White/Caucasian and Asian 'A-' or higher students by private institutions in the NRCCUA data set.

Finding 3 -- The religious affiliation of the student's high school and college preference is related to selection scores.

Students who attend Catholic high schools are selected nearly twice as often as students who attend public and other private high schools. Further, students who lean toward denominational colleges and universities – particularly Jewish, Catholic, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Interdenominational, Lutheran, and Episcopal institutions - also tend to be more often selected by private colleges and universities. In short, there is tremendous competition for the interests of these students; however, there are still hidden opportunities among these students. For instance, the data reveals that students who attend Catholic high schools in the West and South are selected half as often as those in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states.

Finding 4 -- Students in the Northeast are selected very frequently by private institutions compared to other regions.

Geographic analysis reveals that 'A' students in the Southwest (24), West (25), and South (27) are being under-selected relative to 'A' students in New England (59) and the Mid-Atlantic states (58) with students in the Midwest (36) falling in between. This effect is partially, but not completely, explained by the greater availability of high school aged individuals (15-19 year olds), according to 1990 census projections, residing in the West (22%), South (22%) Midwest (25%), and Southwest (11%) versus New England (5%) and the Mid-Atlantic states (15%) and the relatively large number of private colleges and universities in the latter two regions (9% and 25%, respectively; source: the College Board®). Simply put, there are a lot of institutions trolling in the more sparsely populated waters of the Northeast. Therefore, students in these regions are being inundated with materials. This is a cautionary tale for institutions outside the Northeast who seek to penetrate this student market – the competition for a student's attention is fierce. However, targeted searches that would yield a greater number of "hits" may ameliorate some of these barriers. What is a challenge in the Northeast becomes an opportunity in other under-selected regions; there are opportunities for colleges and universities to capture the attention of these students.

Finding 5 -- Money matters.

The vitality of a private college or university depends greatly on the economic strength of that institution. The robust effect of "attributed" income on a student's selection scores indicates that some institutions at least partly guide their search by identifying areas with a greater likelihood of having students with household incomes that would allow them to afford that institution, perhaps without the necessity of a substantial aid package.

While considering likely household income as a search parameter may be a "bete noir" to some admissions professionals, it is a necessary element of survival for others. However, the question remains: *How successful will an individual institution be in transforming search names to enrollees among high income, quality students?* These students are highly sought after, and have the resources to afford a variety of schools and typically the academic credentials to be accepted at several.

For example, using the data from this study, if one searches the West region for 'A' (pure 'A' students, not 'A+' or 'A-') students whose area's "attributed" income is greater than $80,000 they would find 979 students with an average selection score of 33. However, if this region was searched for 'B+' students from areas with "attributed" incomes between $60,000 and $79,999, the 1194 students found would have only been selected 19 times. For most institutions, they are more likely to successfully recruit the 'B+' student than the 'A' student. Further, while some institutions' aspirations may be to elevate the academic profile, other institutions may be looking to fill empty seats. Thus, the net revenue to an institution will assuredly be greater in successfully recruiting the moderate "attributed" income, 'B+' student than leaving the seat vacated by failing to land a higher income, higher-ability student.

Finding 6 -- Understanding the interactions of selection variables with one another and other demographics is critical to sculpting the most robust search.

The results presented in this paper only reveal a small fraction of the interactions that exist among search criteria. Most assuredly, if a university changes the specifications of one parameter, they will affect the results of at least one other, or likely several. In the previous example of the search in the West region, the lowering of the "attributed" income and grade thresholds opened up greater exposure to Latino/Hispanic/Chicano and Black/African-American high school students, raising the former's representation in the pool from 2.8% to 6.8% and the latter's from 0.7% to 2.0%. Thus, the alteration of strategy would increase the likelihood, even if just marginally, for enhancing diversity as well as the general goal of filling empty enrollment slots. Developing differential strategies within certain subgroups will maximize the power of that search to meet multiple institutional goals. For example, if a national search were conducted selecting only students with an 'A-' or above GPA, 45% of Asian/Asian-American and 36% of White/Caucasian students would be eligible for selection, but only 15% of Black/African-American and 19% of Latino/Hispanic/Chicano students. However, altering the GPA criteria to B+ or above would increase the percentage of the underrepresented minority students eligible to 30% and 35% respectively. In the shifting landscape of affirmative action policies, attention to the interactions between ethnic identity and other selection variables can help minimize the erosion in maintaining diversity.

CONCLUSION

The analyses in this paper profile students who are being left behind and others who are being over-solicited. Understanding these dynamics can yield potential new opportunities for institutions to enhance their prospective student base and hone their recruitment strategies. The intention is not to dissuade colleges and universities from seeking to maximize the academic potential of their classes. Rather, the intent here is to apprise institutions of the interactions between many of the key demographic variables. Any institution that takes a unidimensional approach to search specifications may be biasing their student search lists, and their enrollment potential, in unintended ways.

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Exhibit 1

Post 1990 Population Estimates Report by Age and State

	Age 15-19*		NRCCUA Data	
Alabama	319,098	1.6%	7329	2.6%
Alaska	56,192	0.3%	294	0.1%
Arizona	350,289	1.8%	3387	1.2%
Arkansas	194,435	1.0%	4441	1.6%
California	2,358,276	11.9%	24787	8.9%
Colorado	309,168	1.6%	3020	1.1%
Connecticut	209,565	1.1%	1727	0.6%
Delaware	51,097	0.3%	901	0.3%
District of Columbia	25,369	0.1%	372	0.1%
Florida	957,418	4.8%	12907	4.7%
Georgia	570,441	2.9%	9341	3.4%
Hawaii	82,664	0.4%	1058	0.4%
Idaho	111,679	0.6%	1993	0.7%
Illinois	871,850	4.4%	11294	4.1%
Indiana	443,779	2.2%	6716	2.4%
Iowa	225,927	1.1%	3581	1.3%
Kansas	213,254	1.1%	3621	1.3%
Kentucky	294,996	1.5%	5794	2.1%
Louisiana	369,986	1.9%	6987	2.5%
Maine	90,383	0.5%	820	0.3%
Maryland	348,594	1.8%	3609	1.3%
Massachusetts	389,416	2.0%	3264	1.2%
Michigan	734,294	3.7%	11853	4.3%
Minnesota	375,657	1.9%	5447	2.0%
Mississippi	229,775	1.2%	5359	1.9%
Missouri	412,528	2.1%	7283	2.6%
Montana	73,898	0.4%	1338	0.5%
Nebraska	136,154	0.7%	2121	0.8%
Nevada	121,705	0.6%	1366	0.5%
New Hampshire	84,190	0.4%	673	0.2%
New Jersey	519,320	2.6%	4560	1.6%
New Mexico	144,062	0.7%	2598	0.9%
New York	1,187,958	6.0%	11446	4.1%
North Carolina	520,677	2.6%	9330	3.4%
North Dakota	53,165	0.3%	1179	0.4%
Ohio	831,214	4.2%	14708	5.3%
Oklahoma	267,953	1.4%	5125	1.9%
Oregon	243,661	1.2%	2656	1.0%
Pennsylvania	823,742	4.2%	11968	4.3%
Rhode Island	65,217	0.3%	624	0.2%
South Carolina	283,583	1.4%	4833	1.7%
South Dakota	63,235	0.3%	1169	0.4%
Tennessee	385,294	2.0%	8991	3.2%
Texas	1,594,041	8.1%	22853	8.2%
Utah	211,764	1.1%	3559	1.3%
Vermont	43,814	0.2%	338	0.1%
Virginia	477,142	2.4%	5738	2.1%
Washington	432,856	2.2%	3875	1.4%
West Virginia	130,816	0.7%	2580	0.9%
Wisconsin	412,677	2.1%	5263	1.9%
Wyoming	43,655	0.2%	941	0.3%

* Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

Exhibit 2 Profile of the Sample		
	n	%
Gender		
Male	128,840	46.5%
Female	148,184	53.5%
Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3,289	1.2%
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander	7,707	2.8%
Black/African American	29,335	10.6%
Latino/Hispanic/Chicano	22,147	8.0%
White/Caucasian	153,044	55.2%
Other	4,913	1.8%
Multi-racial	22,415	8.1%
Preferred not to report	34,176	12.3%
Attributed Household Income		
$1-$9,999	34	0.0%
$10,000-$19,999	7,579	2.7%
$20,000-$29,999	40,721	14.7%
$30,000-$39,999	76,563	27.6%
$40,000-$49,999	59,425	21.5%
$50,000-$59,999	35,287	12.7%
$60,000-$69,999	21,674	7.8%
$70,000-$79,999	13,214	4.8%
$80,000-$89,999	8,521	3.1%
$90,000-$99,999	5,512	2.0%
$100,000+	8,100	2.9%
Not reported	395	0.1%
High School Grade Point Average		
A+/A/A-	84,321	30.4%
B+/B/B-	136,687	49.4%
C+/C	49,997	18.0%
Lower than C	6,020	2.2%
Type of High School		
Catholic	13,761	5.0%
Public	242,167	87.4%
Private	4,891	1.8%
Christian	4,800	1.7%
Not reported	11,406	4.1%

Figure A
The Admissions Funnel

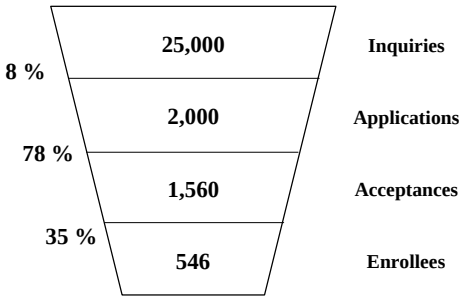

Table 1

		Selection Scores		
		Mean	**Range**	**n**
Quartile 1	Least Selected	3.0	0 to 6	64,997
Quartile 2	Low-Moderate Selected	11.2	7 to 16	75,144
Quartile 3	Moderate-High Selected	22.8	17 to 30	68,915
Quartile 4	Most Selected	48.1	31 to 135	67,969

Figure B
Average Number of Times Students Are Selected by a Private College/University
by Students' Grade Point Average

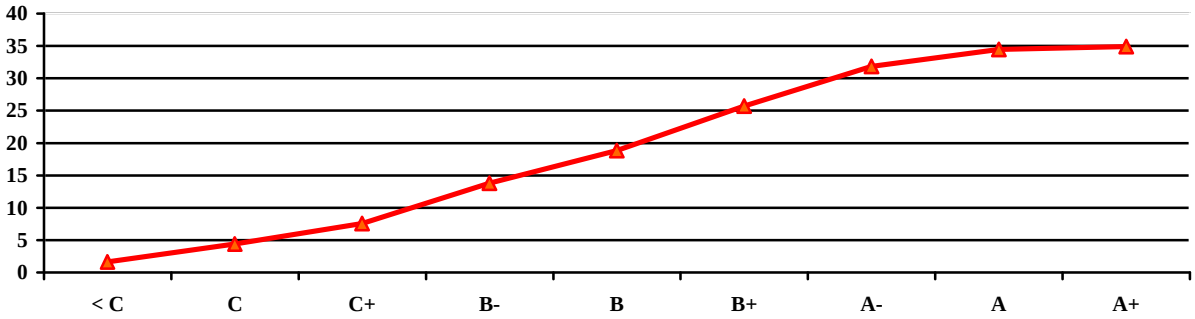

Figure C
Average Number of Times Students Are Selected by a Private College/University
by High School Grade Point Average and Geo-Income

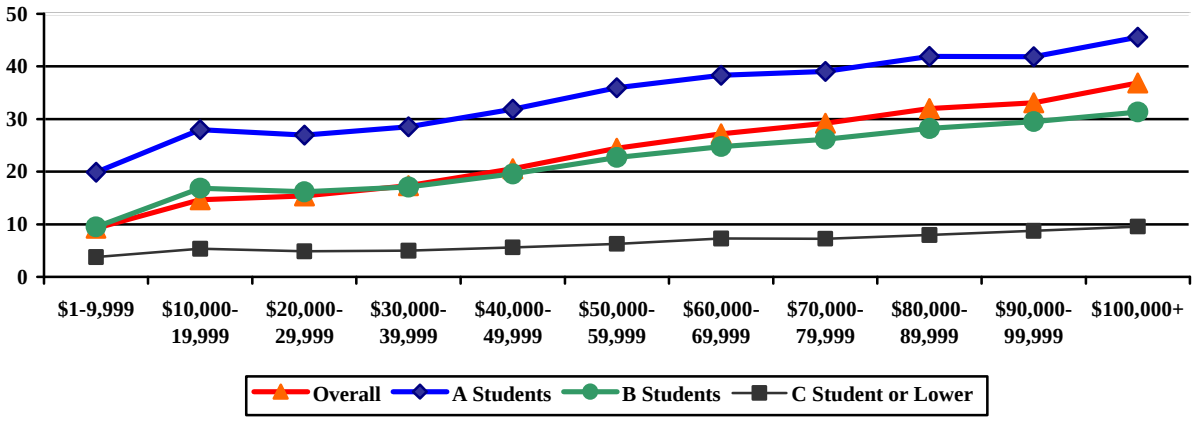

Figure D
Average Number of Times Students Are Selected by a Private College/University
by Type of High School Across Geo-Income

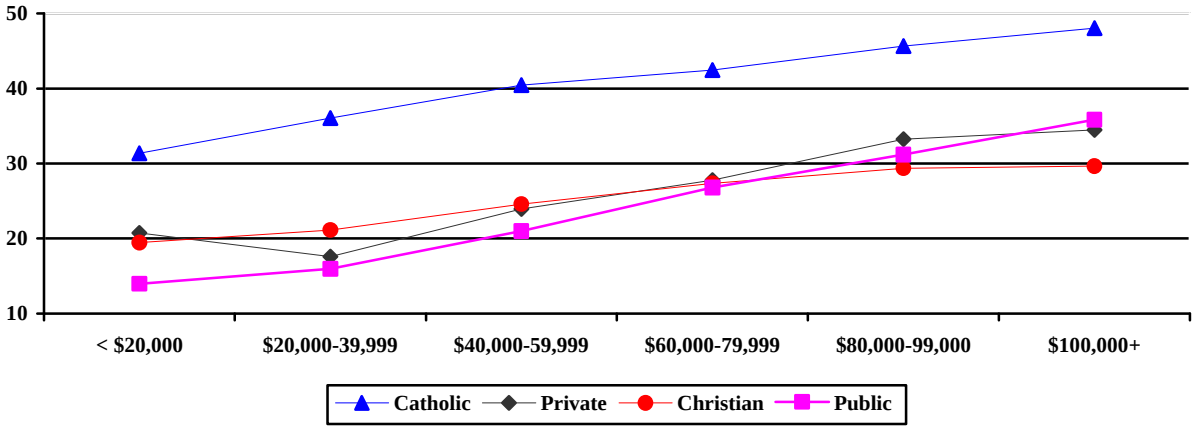

Figure E
Average Number of Times Students Are Selected by a Private College/University
by Students' Ethnicity

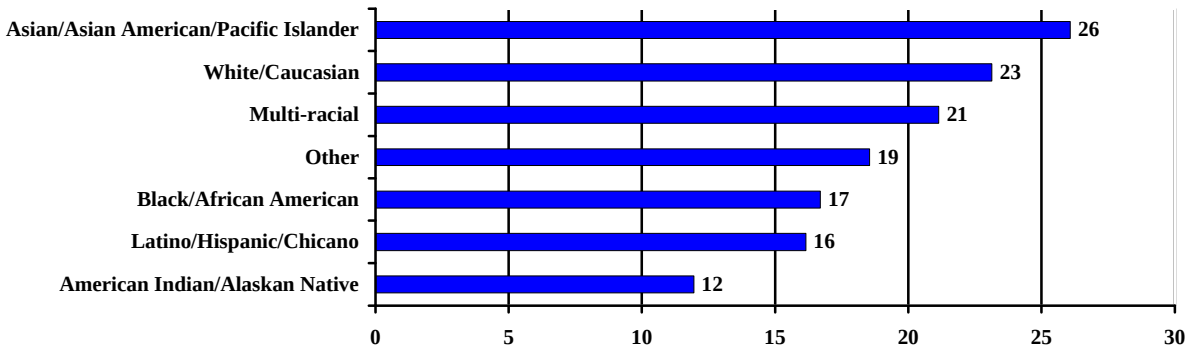

Figure F
Average Number of Times Students Are Selected by a Private College/University by Students' Region of Residence

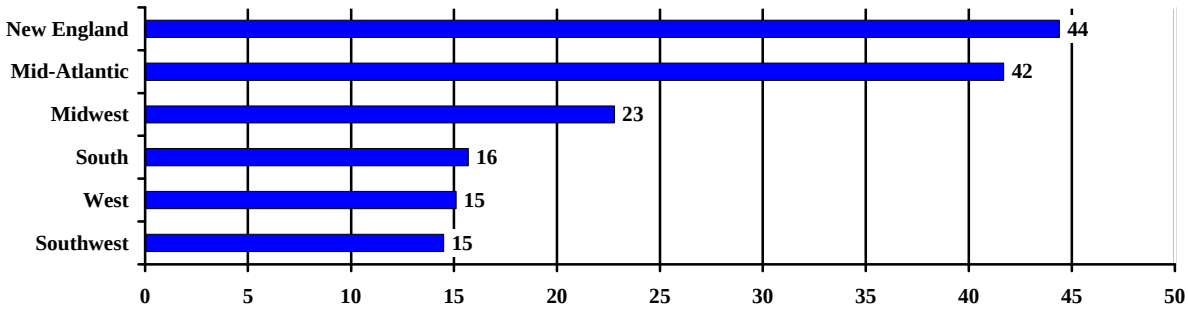

Figure G
Multiple Regression Analysis
Predictive Model of Private College/University Selection Scores