

Chairs' Corner – September 2008

Undergraduate Admissions

TO: UW Foundation, Campaign Cabinet, Deans, University Advancement Staff

FROM: Orin C. Smith, Chair, UW Foundation,
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Dear Friends,

This is the calm before the storm. In the slanting September sun, the UW campus feels a bit like a summer resort after Labor Day—beautiful, peaceful, under-populated. But in just a few days, the tsunami of students will come washing in. (An event that is always welcomed, we should make clear, by faculty and staff, who find the quiet campus a little boring.) And the highest-energy wave will undoubtedly be this year's 5,500 freshmen.

They will have even more reason than usual to feel exuberant. If you had college applicants in your family this year, you know all too well that 2008 was the most competitive college-admissions year ever, here and across the country. "We're at the top of a demographic boom in high-school graduates," says Philip Ballinger, UW Director of Admissions. Anticipating this crest in the "baby-boom echo," the UW expanded its target 2008 freshman class by another 200 students beyond last year's large 5,300. Even so, the 2008 entering class will be not only the largest in UW history, but also the most selective. For these freshmen, just being here is cause for celebration.

Here are some of the numbers. This year's applications (19,905) were up almost 12 percent over 2007 (itself a record year). But offers of admission rose only 5.2 percent—the most the UW could do if it was not to exceed its allotted space for freshmen. (There is no room here to discuss the complexities of "yield," the percentage of accepted students who actually enroll.) So while 64.6 percent of 2007 applicants were offered admission, this year offers went to only 60.8 percent. When you bear in mind that just two years ago the offer rate was over 68 percent, and in 2001 it was over 78 percent, you begin to understand the shock and bafflement of many of this year's students and their families when they were denied admission.

"Suddenly," says Philip Ballinger, "good students whose families have historic ties to the UW are not getting in. This is extremely difficult for families and very frustrating for us—especially because the vast majority who were not admitted could have done well here."

Interestingly, the surge in applications was far greater for out-of-state students (whose applications rose by almost 20 percent over 2007) than for residents (up by 5.5 percent), and the greatest increase of all—over 40 percent!—was in international applicants. (Many other American universities also saw an international "bubble," generally

attributed to the weak U.S. dollar.) Did non-residents, then, who pay much higher tuition, win a higher-than-normal share of spaces in this freshman class? No, says Ballinger. As a matter of policy, the mix remains roughly the same as in recent years: about 80 percent resident, 20 percent non-resident. The out-of-state students, who form a separate applicant pool, just had a much harder time getting in. The admission rate for Washington students this year was 65.1 percent, while for non-residents it was 56 percent. (Another way of saying this: the number of Washington students who were denied admission rose by 17 percent this year, while for non-residents the rise was 31 percent.)

Getting into the University used to be simpler as well as easier. For many years, an applicant's high-school GPA and SAT scores were factored into an Admissions Index, and that number pretty much determined his or her fate. So if you knew the average scores of the current UW freshman class—back in 1990, the average entering GPA was 3.47 and the average combined SAT score was 1126 (out of a possible 1600)—you had a good sense of your own chances. Next came a period when students in the top two-thirds of the Admissions Index were still admitted automatically, but the remaining applicants were evaluated “holistically”—that is, admissions staff looked beyond bare numbers at the finer details of life stories and academic records, trying to determine which of these borderline students might succeed here.

In 2006, the University took the next step: it instituted holistic review for every single applicant. This has long been standard, of course, at private colleges and universities, but for a large public institution it is a huge undertaking. The admissions office now employs a cadre of graduate students, alongside its own staff, to read through and evaluate the applications (roughly 20,000 for this autumn, remember), and gives all readers many hours of training to make sure criteria are well understood and uniformly applied.

What are those criteria? Well, the academic numbers still count, but they are now “contextualized,” in Ballinger's term. For example: in the context of your own high-school offerings, did you take the tough, ambitious courses? Did you succeed despite hardships in your life? Does your essay describe experiences that gave you special insight or cultural awareness? Would you bring any truly exceptional talents to the UW, academic or otherwise? “We're trying to create a class,” says Ballinger—by which he means a body of varied students who complement and therefore help educate one another.

(It is worth noting some criteria that are not in play. Racial and ethnic identities are withheld from those who assess applications. And children of alumni have no edge. “There are so many,” says Ballinger. “If we counted that, this would be a university of alumni rather than a university of Washington.”)

The virtues of the new process are obvious: a much fuller, fairer sense of each applicant as an individual, more opportunity for students whose potential is not fully captured by the numbers, and a class that is deliberately shaped to provide a richer learning environment for students. But to applicants, the process looks more complex and less

transparent than it used to. Along with the rising number of applicants, “holistic review” probably accounts for some of the anxiety and harsh surprises of the 2008 admissions season. Ballinger’s fear is that some good students will start to self-select out of the applicant pool. “We’d hate for that to happen—I have my radar on for this,” he says.

But Ballinger is proud of this year’s entering class and of the process that formed it. Academically, the class is the strongest ever: average entering GPA is 3.71 and average combined SAT score is 1209. This is only a slight rise over last year (3.69 and 1205) but quite a distance from those 1990 scores (3.47 and 1126). At the same time, the percentage of under-represented students, by both racial and economic definitions, is also rising. “Maintaining our proportion of first-generation and low-income students is a priority, part of our mission to the state,” says Ballinger. “So we’re very pleased with holistic review, on all kinds of levels.”

(Footnotes: these SAT scores represent, for comparative purposes, only the old verbal and math sections of what is now a three-part test, which has added a new writing section. And the statistical profile of the class is not final until the census that is taken ten days after classes begin.)

What about the future? “Next year will be similar to this, but then there will be a period of fairly sharp decline in the number of high-school graduates,” says Ballinger. “By 2014, which is the bottom of the trough, we might be down by 7 or 8 percent.” Even so, admission to the UW is likely to remain highly competitive. “Over the past couple of decades,” Ballinger says, “students have focused more and more on a smaller group of colleges and universities”—of which the UW is one. So the days of “easy” admission here are probably gone for good. We are becoming a different kind of university.

Orin, Dan, and Bill