

Book Review of *College Unranked: Affirming Educational Values in College Admissions* by Lloyd Thacker (editor)

BY GREG DUBROW

Accountability is a word that has become very familiar to university administrators. Increasingly over the past two decades, public college officials have been dealing with state legislators demanding accountability for tax-payer appropriations. More recently the accountability focus has shifted to student learning and graduation rates. Meanwhile, officials at private institutions are facing calls to show a return on the significant financial investment their students make.

While the college admissions process has been the subject of a fair amount of criticism over the last two decades, hardly any attention has been focused on accountability in admissions, which has become, according to the critics, a crassly commercialized and hyper-commodified process. In one sense, accountability in the admissions process is measured every day—admissions personnel are held accountable for the number of students admitted, the number turned away, and the characteristics of admitted students. However, critics contend that this is the *wrong type* of accountability and the wrong way to look at college admissions. Instead, say the critics, we ought to be focusing on educational values and developing good fits between students and institutions—not the prestige game.

The negative effects of the commodification of the college admissions process is not a new topic, nor has the criticism been limited to admissions. Cries of commercialism in higher education have run long and deep: At the turn of the 20th century, Thorstein Veblen referred sarcastically to college presidents as “captains of erudition” (a play on the term “captain of industry”) who were managing

the affairs of their institutions more like robber baron capitalists and less like educators.

Much of the criticism of college admissions has come from mass media and higher education researchers, not the people who do the counseling, recruiting and those who make admissions decision-making. In mass media, the *Atlantic Monthly* of late has been home to James Fallows' survey of admissions directors and his scathing follow-up analysis. The *Atlantic's* concern is not new, however; their coverage of the issue goes back to 1979. Fallows' central premise is that college admissions has become a game that is corrupt on all sides. He rails against college administrators who seek to boost guidebook rankings by soliciting scores of applicants who do not stand a chance at admission, thereby artificially lowering admit rates. Fallows also takes aim at students for applying to too many colleges, for focusing on prestige at the expense of "best fit," and for using independent consultants who advise students to write formulaic essays. Parents also take flak from Fallows for the extent of their involvement in the process, sometimes to the point of sacrificing the student's desires to their own.

A host of researchers including David Breneman and Patricia McDonough have chronicled the frenzy over admission to the prestige market and the use of private counseling resources by middle- and upper-income students fearful of sliding down the economic ladder. Back in 1979 David Reisman warned of an already commercialized admissions process and predicted correctly that things would only get worse with the post-baby-boom decline in the pool of college-age students.

Given the stakes associated with admission to the most prestigious undergraduate institutions, some think it is time to account for the place of educational values in college admissions. Enter Lloyd Thacker.

According to Thacker, the college admissions process has become a soulless, corrupt and hypercommercialized process in which both student and college have become nothing more than crassly marketed product. Thacker, a veteran college counselor and admissions officer, in the past year has led a crusade against what he sees as wrong with college admissions. His nonprofit group, The Education Conservancy, was founded initially to publish his book, *College Unranked: Affirming Educational Values in College Admissions* (The Educa-

tion Conservancy, 2004). Now the group serves as Thacker's base for imploring students and admissions officers not to succumb to the evils of marketing and to bring some rationality back to the process. He advocates for a system that will help students focus on which school will best meet their educational and social needs, rather than which is trendy or will look good on a resume.

College Unranked features 20 short essays by a host of people involved in college admissions. Thacker contributes introductory and ending pieces, as well as "editor's story" essays, anecdotes from his career in counseling and admissions that link the sections of the book. Most of the contributions come from college deans or directors of admissions, ranging from those who work at the most prestigious schools to representatives from "the other 96 percent." These other schools do the heavy lifting in American higher education, as Harold Wingood, Dean of Admissions at Clark University, writes in his contribution "Establishing the Right Perspective Regarding College Admissions." Wingood writes that media stories about what's wrong with college admissions, particularly early admissions programs, come from a too-narrow focus on a tiny segment of American higher education, one that is not truly representative of the landscape. At the same time, Wingood maintains that this "elite" segment serves as a model for college presidents with aspirations for their institutions, and more important, serves as the factory for maintaining the country's economic and social elite. As such, this segment is the public face of American higher education.

The range of topics covered in the book includes accountability, commercialism, the purpose of education and core professional values. Though focused around a set of common themes, the essays are written to different audiences. Some essays are written to fellow admissions professionals, some to students, some to parents and some to the world in general. A few essays are written from the dual perspective of admissions professional and parent of a college-bound student. Some essays are railing against the system, some are essentially mea culpas, and some, including one from Harvard University, are both. Admissions professionals from the elite schools revile the very system they have created and fostered. This is not to dismiss the point made by the Harvard authors (William Fitzsimmons, Marlyn McGrath Lewis and Charles Ducey) nor to call them hypocrites. Rather, the very fact that officials from Harvard would acknowledge publicly that the "frenzied search for the brass ring" (p. 25) has created students who are programmed from pre-K onward to do the things that will get them into the right

college is very telling; they know that the system is broken. Their essay does beg the question, however, of just what they plan to do to help fix things.

Accountability is a major theme in the book, the subject of two of Thacker's editor's stories and a number of essays. These essays discuss the College Board and ways in which colleges manipulate data in order to improve their ranking in the *U.S. News & World Report* and other guides. Mark Speyer's essay compares the numbers games played to increase ranking scores to the Soviet plant managers who manipulated output to make their numbers look better, never mind that the product was flawed or useless. Speyer decries the influence of external forces like ranking on the admissions process, arguing that college officials will solicit applications from students who do not have a shot at gaining entry, solely for the purpose of lowering the admit rates. James Sumner argues a similar point, wondering why there is no penalty for submitting misleading numbers to *U.S. News* and guidebooks such as Peterson's or the College Board, and why those agencies do not demand specific figures.

Ted O'Neil's contribution offers the most pointed criticism. O'Neil, Dean of Admission at University of Chicago and a long-time member of various College Board committees, tells of being wined and dined at College Board membership meetings. He questions the extravagant spending by the College Board, a non-profit group financed by membership and testing fees, with a mission to ensure fairness in testing and financial aid. O'Neil calls disastrous and unseemly the decision by the College Board to spin off a for-profit entity, *collegeboard.com*. He asks whether by overtly seeking profit, the College Board is acting in the best interest of its members and the students who pay hefty fees for testing. O'Neil also takes issue with the high cost of Advanced Placement testing, noting that low-income students are priced out of the service, despite the fact that they can benefit as much (if not more) from AP credits as students from wealthier families.

The nature and purpose of education and going to college is the subject of a number of essays. The general lament is that the competition for the few spaces in the prestige segment schools has caused students to spend their middle and high school years as educational preprofessionals, maximizing every moment for the goal of getting into the right college, and not spending enough time just being teenagers. Kim Stafford writes as a concerned parent accompanying his daughter to a college recruiting event. He wonders how his daughter is handling

the stresses and irrationality of the college selection process. He also expresses concern for another student who is so stressed out that he runs out to vomit while a college representative is speaking. Other essayists talk about student burn-out; the role of parents in the process; and whether students, parents and admissions officers pay enough attention to the basic purpose of education: the accumulation of knowledge and development of critical thinking skills. The common theme is that students should opt out of the prestige game and focus more on aligning the culture of the colleges they are considering with their own personalities. Students, parents and admissions officers are urged to put learning and personal development ahead of the search for the brass ring, the implicit assumption being that the ring will be earned if the student takes care of what is important.

The essay-to-essay quality is generally good, and the tone thankfully is conversational and not laden with research jargon and wonkishness. The voices are generally those of knowledgeable people who see a world askew and offer good-hearted suggestions about how to set things back in balance. The voice that is noticeably missing is the students'. For all the talk of what is wrong with admissions and the resulting deleterious effects on students' psyches and educations, we do not hear from those students. After a dozen essays from adults, the reader starts to wonder what students think about all of this. Why do they reach for the brass ring? What do they think of being inundated by brochures, CD-ROMs, invitations to college nights? How do they handle the pressures of keeping their grades up while participating in a daunting set of necessary extracurricular activities? If there is a *College Unranked II*, one hopes that student voices will feature prominently in the mix.

Thacker gets the conversation started from the inside out. It is refreshing to hear college presidents, admissions deans and other adults own up to the fact that something is not quite right. Whether anything will change is the big question, and that begs more questions: If change depends on people being held accountable for their actions, what might that change look like? What would accountability in college admissions entail? Who could or should lead the way? Thacker's collection, building on other critiques, most notably the *Atlantic Monthly* articles, serves as a useful starting point.