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How I Got Into College

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In the late 1980s, 20th Century Fox distributed a teen romantic comedy called *How I Got Into College*. The movie followed the adventures of Marlon as he pursued the "girl of his dreams," Jessica. Jessica hoped to attend a fictional Pennsylvania institution, Ramsey College, which advertised to prospective students that it sought "more than the numbers."

The movie was not a box office success but it developed something of a cult following among high school seniors thinking about college. It was crammed with hilarious one-liners. One young woman preparing to be tutored for her SAT's proclaimed, for example, that she would only be accepted at colleges to which you would never go. Living in Michigan, she suggested one solution to improve her chances would be to move to Montana. The young woman reasoned that every college accepts at least one student from Montana.

The movie spoke to changing admissions standards and the rigors of application at selective private liberal arts institutions. It also raised an important question. How do I get into college?
The answer to this question begins with the supposition that not everyone needs to go to college. It is possible to find productive work and enjoy a rich and rewarding life without a college degree. For those who choose to go, however, the changing, shifting definition of "college" opens up new and often bewildering choices.

For applicants, should college begin at a two-year institution? Nearly 50 percent of those beginning their education start here. What is the value of attending a for-profit institution, particularly if the for-profit is cheaper, more convenient, allows the student to work, and has a reasonable track record of career placement upon graduation? Does a four-year institution make sense, given its high sticker price and residential requirements? Or, is a research university a better choice, particularly for those who seek advance professional degrees? Where do [MOOC](#)'s fit in?

The complexity when selecting a higher education institution shifts the burden of proof directly to America's colleges and universities. The first admissions tool to throw on the discard pile soon will be the four-color glossy brochure. Institutions will rely less on older, undifferentiated admission strategies that target diminishing pools of traditional applicants.

For college admission offices, the first order of business will be to secure the base. These efforts require increasingly focused, ongoing and sustainable relationships with the 100 high schools and prep schools from which the college or university draws applicants.

This pipeline strategy must fit into a broader overall picture. It should be linked to admission targets, anticipate shifting demographics, and fulfill commitments to build a diverse admission class. Once the base is secured, college admissions officers must rethink how relationships develop. It will be insufficient to fold legacies, student athletes, and "over the transom" applicants into a robust and dynamic freshman class to meet goals established by the college's strategic plan. Indeed, college leadership must reach down to students in middle school to begin a dialogue with future applicants about why college is important to them.

It may well be that familial, cultural and social barriers will be the biggest obstacle to building future admissions classes, particularly as colleges cast a wider application net. Colleges and universities must look to promising programs like the [Ontario - Montclair (CA) Promise Scholars](#) project. The project is universal in design and does not target high or low performing students. Rather, it seeks to change the mindset in schools, families, and the larger community to a "college-going" culture where the expectation is that all students need to graduate from high school and then achieve some type of post secondary certificate or college degree.

The Promise Scholars project is entrepreneurial because it employs a wide range of partners in the planning and delivery of services. Students in the Ontario - Montclair school district are offered an integrated readiness, proficiency, information and assessment protocol to create a "cradle through career" education pipeline. It's a promising strategy to provide educational opportunity and is an extraordinary admissions tool.

Colleges and universities must also look to new building blocks that go beyond legacies and student athletes as part of a seamless, lifelong education. They will likely focus on two-year graduates moving into upper division institutions and foreign students wishing to study in America. These groups reinforce the prevailing view that students now learn about college differently than depicted in the movies.

And this is where technology can help. Most of the discussion in American higher education has been upon how technology will impact learning. In fact, new technology platforms that address where students learn use social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to dramatically reshape how colleges will attract students. The ed tech community is already developing new strategies to predict student attendance, retention, persistence and graduation rates.

If these forces come together, America might finally resolve its dilemma on how to create a college going culture in which the term "college" is more broadly defined as lifelong learning and the audience is more receptive to the message. In the future, the answer to how I got into college will likely come from a mix of what happens in basic education, local communities, guidance partnerships, and social media. Colleges and universities cannot stand on the sidelines. It's time to put the pieces of the puzzle together. America's ability to remain competitive depends upon it.

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