

Candor, Confidentiality, and the College Admissions of Recovering Students

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ABSTRACT

When gifted students recovering from self destructive behaviors apply to college, their applications pose a challenge to the recommenders and admissions officers who read their recommendations. These adolescents have inconsistent academic records and mediocre scores on standardized tests. This article analyzes the issues involved in writing recommendations for gifted, recovering students and discusses strategies for writing letters that can persuade Admissions committees to accept such applicants. It offers advice to admissions officers about how to differentiate between recovering students likely to fulfill their potentials and those likely to fail.

PREVARICATION IN THE 1990's

Deceit is pandemic, and is often regarded with tolerance.

College admissions directors encourage unqualified students to apply to lower their college's acceptance rate, which makes the institution seem more competitive and selective. Often, colleges give such students assurances of admission, even when these promises are false. The President of John Dewey, for example, has received several promises from admissions directors in the last three years regarding applicants who were rejected. What colleges fail to comprehend is that these students assume they will be admitted, so they are unprepared when they receive rejections. For a few, these rejections can be devastating, because they cause intense feelings of depression, shame, and failure. Unable to cope with this disappointment, some will contemplate suicide. A few will kill themselves. Parents whose son or daughter has committed suicide after being rejected by a college which offered false hopes of admission should litigate by claiming malpractice and wrongful death. It is unethical for colleges to encourage applicants when the possibility of admission is remote. A more reasonable response would be, "Acceptance is unlikely, but you should apply and see what happens." While colleges would receive fewer applications if they practiced honesty, no one can criticize this realistic advice. Stated more forcefully, deliberate deceit practiced by college admission offices is unprofessional, outrageous, and wrong.

Cheating has become epidemic on college campuses and in high schools. Altschuler (2001) documents this trend:

Measured by recent surveys, cheating has reached epi-

demic proportions in high schools and colleges. In a survey of 21,000 students by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, 70 percent of high school students and 54 percent of middle schoolers admitted that they had cheated on an exam. That is up sharply from a study in "The State of Americans:

This Generation and the Next," edited by Urie Bronfenbrenner and others. That study found that 33.8 percent of high school students used a "cheat sheet" on a test in 1969. By 1989 the percentage had risen to 67.8. Furthermore, 58.3 percent of high school students let someone else copy their work in 1969 and 97.5 percent did so in 1989. A recent study by the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University yielded results similar to the Josephson study, with almost 75 percent of college students acknowledging some academic dishonesty.

The admissions process reflects societal acceptance of distorting the truth for personal gain. Recognizing this reality, White (1989) subtitled his article, "Whatever Happened to Honesty in College Admission?" Selective colleges now accept less than twenty percent of those who apply. Moll & Wright (1998) report that "many top universities...received the highest number of applications [that they have ever received] and handed out the lowest number of acceptances." Bronner (1999) describes the college admissions campaign: "top high school seniors [were] rejected by colleges of their choice, second tier institutions [were] overwhelmed with excellent applications, and state universities [were] raising admission requirements" (p. A1).

Since competitive colleges can fill their first year classes several times without compromising quality, even superior academic achievement and excellent test scores no longer guarantee admission by a top ranked college. In view of this reality, is it any wonder why students with mediocre records often inflate and distort their achievements? Rowatt & Rowatt (1998) contend that most students exaggerate "future goals, conscientiousness, motivation to excel, ambitiousness, and sociability to gain admission." While the best and brightest students accept this reality as a challenge to work diligently and improve their records, less talented students recognize their dilemma: Exaggerate or be rejected. Nyberg (1993) writes, "When the chance of getting caught is not great, [most] of us are willing to deceive...with untormented conscience....We have learned to use deception...to enhance our wellbeing" (p. 1).

In order to reduce dishonesty, there need to be severe sanctions for deliberate deceit. When colleges discover applicants have been dishonest, the students should be expelled; their admission was based on fraudulent data. If the liar attends graduate school, colleges must consider notifying the institution about corrupt acts. While this policy appears harsh, a student who deserved to be admitted was rejected instead of the liar, which is not fair. At the very least, the college should consider rescinding the degree which was attained with dishonest assertions. Colleges, rightfully so, expel those who cheat. Conversely, productive behavior and honesty need to be rewarded to create a more positive campus environment.

Parents, counselors, and consultants are confronted by many ethical questions regarding how much help they give to students writing personal statements and essays. Hammond (1998) asks, "Is it ok to flag spelling mistakes? Correct them? What about bad grammar? Word choice? Can counselors suggest alternative words?" (p.3) Viewing dishonesty from an institutional perspective, Roth (1998) wonders whether those involved in the admissions process will choose to be "counselors or recruiters, teachers or salespeople, ministers or hustlers?" (p. 27).

THE REALITY OF LITIGATION

Writers of recommendations for college applicants are placed in a legal double bind. On the one hand, Bronner (1998) notes that "admissions officers complain if a student's disciplinary or criminal past is not being reported" (p. A1). Colleges may, in fact, do more than complain about such omissions from a student's record. In 1998, for example, Yale University claimed that a graduate student who distorted her application had attempted to steal an education by engaging in fraud; the University expelled and then prosecuted the student. On the other hand, Bronner describes increasing numbers of parents who "threaten...lawsuits if their children fail to gain college acceptance"; he suggests that counselors consider purchasing liability insurance.

If the student is a minor, the family legally retains the right to determine the parameters of confidentiality. Writers of recommendations should, therefore, require explicit written permission from the family to disclose any self destructive or criminal behavior. If the family refuses such permission and attempts to convince the writer to conceal troubling facts, writers can refuse to write a recommendation and maintain their integrity. The recommender should give the letter to the student, who may choose not to send the letter or to send it with a written explanation or reaction. Families need to be convinced that honesty will be appreciated and is a necessity when the student's grades are mediocre or inferior. It is impossible to camouflage academic performance, because a transcript is like a mirror which reflects the student's performance. The former Associate Dean of Enrollment Management at

Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration wrote a letter complimenting a student who had honestly discussed his past problems in the college application essay:

Your thoughtful letter is...appreciated. I agree with your assessment that it was a very unusual finish to our interview. Please be assured that under no circumstances did anything in our individual sessions become part of my interview notes. I have worked with [the author] before and recognize that his methods are unconventional.

You impress me as...[being] alert and bright.... Use these skills to your advantage, and start a record of high performance.... I am concerned that your academics could be viewed by our faculty committee as requiring another year of continued strong performance.

These students should use their essays and interviews to discuss how they have transcended past behaviors and become responsible young adults. They should demonstrate that they have learned to use, rather than to abuse, their superior potential.

A recommender's first obligation is not to the student, but to the truth. To distort the student's record by inflating positive attributes or omitting past problems will compromise not only the writer's integrity and reputation, but also those of the school. Candid writers of recommendations establish reputations that will benefit future students; college admissions officers who trust such recommenders' comments will be guided by their recommendations.

REASONS TO ADMIT RECOVERING STUDENTS

Admission committees should give recovering students special consideration. Colleges recruit students who can enrich the quality of life in the classroom, on the campus, and on the athletic fields. College administrations are being confronted with a new set of social problems which includes binge drinking, excessive drug use, date rape, vandalism, and a casual attitude towards cheating. Left untreated, self destructive forms of behavior threaten to destroy the essence of academic and moral life on college campuses. Recovering students can deter others from engaging in destructive behavior, and, in so doing, they can improve the quality of life on campus by serving as resident advisors in dorms and powerful members of student government.

The example of MIT is sobering to any college administrator. McGinn, Lauerma, and Salisbury (2000) describe the lingering effects of a student's death:

Kruger's 1997 death still haunts his family-and the MIT campus. Last week the university agreed to pay \$4.75 million to Scott's parents and \$1.25 million to a scholarship fund in his memory. That's believed to be a record settlement for such a death...."At a very personal level, I feel that we at MIT failed you and Scott," MIT's president, Charles Vest, wrote to [Kruger's parents]. "For this you

have our profound apology.”

Vest [stated] that “our approach to alcohol education and policy...were inadequate.” MIT is not alone. Though deaths from alcohol poisoning are still rare, excessive student drinking is not. Nationwide, 44% of students are “binge drinkers,” according to surveys by Harvard’s School of Public Health; bingers are defined as men who’ve consumed five drinks in one sitting within the past two weeks, and women who’ve had four in a row. And no one disputes that alcohol fuels...date rapes, vandalism, and poor grades. (p. 45)

MIT’s seemingly benign neglect contributed to Kruger’s death. As the university recognized after the fact, they could not deny that college administrators had ignored student concerns and warnings about campus alcohol abuse. In order to avoid negative publicity, MIT settled out of court. Though the university probably paid more than a jury would have awarded, it limited the damage to its institutional reputation.

Recovering students, who had internalized their reasons for responsible behavior, could have made a decisive difference to MIT. Possessing credibility, their suggestions probably would have served to catalyze corrective action by the MIT administration. At the very least, admitting a few such students as positive role models would have allowed the university to assert that it was attempting to decrease drug and alcohol abuse on campus. Recovering students can influence others to be moderate. Furthermore, because they know that their recovery depends on preserving their self respect, these students possess the strength and courage to confront those who become disruptive or self destructive. Bratter & Parker (1994) assert that recovering students have gained an awareness of themselves and have learned how to develop the capacity for intimate interpersonal relationships. Gifted, underachieving students have developed this capacity because they appreciate the value of bonding, which they know is a solution for alienation, pain, and loneliness. A social maturity concurrently has been developed which is compassionate and respectful of individual differences. Recovering students feel little need to create the macho mature image to prove their toughness and create social sophistication. For the most part, recovering students limit their participation in the traditional, hedonistic activities such as alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and physical fights which have spread from fraternities to the dorms and parties. Since accepting accountability for their actions and being governed by moral thinking which values self respect, furthermore, these individuals often become rational and responsible restraining forces on college campuses. Recovering students have internalized rules with an understanding that they are there for stability and growth, not as an authoritative self centered power play. They recognize why abiding by an implicit social contract improves the quality of life for all by respecting the rights of others.

Recovering students often become trusted and respected campus leaders, especially in dormitories.

Knowing how to resist pressures and temptations which have prompted them to engage in their past self destructive acts, these special students may confront others before a crisis occurs. Failing to persuade peers to terminate potentially life threatening behavior, they know how to seek help by notifying college personnel who can intervene to prevent a tragedy before it becomes a reality. Recovering students are motivated by awareness of the pain of rejection and failure their self destructive acts caused themselves, their families, and their friends. They are assertive. These students fear becoming part of the conspiracy of silence that can precipitate their relapse. They possess the courage to confront the self destructive, dysfunctional, alienated, angry, vicious, or violent behavior of their classmates without worrying about being viewed by them as informers.

Although...impossible to calculate their value to the college community, at the very least they can provide a sense of security for the administration. As part of their treatment, recovering adolescents have learned the concept of responsible concern, which views intervention to be an act of friendship rather than as betrayal or as prostituting themselves to rules and regulations. These adolescents retain a vested interest to control and contain anti social and self destructive acts as part of their recovery (pp. 26-27).

Clearly, recovering students can create a positive environment on college campuses.

THE ACT OF ADVOCACY

Despite the strength that recovering students bring to college campuses, they will be denied admission at colleges of quality without the strong support of the recommender. The writer needs to become an advocate for the student through such strategies as “telephone calls, correspondence, and...meetings with personnel who are in a position of influence and power” (Hallowitz 1974, p. 422). Advocacy needs to be passionate and credible. Recommenders should specify the professional and personal qualifications that entitle them to make trustworthy judgments about recovering students. Recovering applicants can prevent crises and tragedies which are unique and valuable contributions in this age of legislation.

Letters of recommendation for gifted, recovering students should describe weaknesses realistically, but emphasize strengths. An effective recommendation describes past dysfunctional behavior honestly, documents recovery, and discusses specifically how the student might contribute to the college in the classroom and on the campus. Browne-Miller (1996) contends that “elite private universities...[do and should] look at individuals in terms of not only their academic abilities and their near futures,

but also their potential for marked contributions throughout adulthood" (pp. 103104).

Since recovering students must convince colleges they have overcome traumatic and self-destructive pasts, their essays play an essential role in the admissions process. Applicants need to describe how they view their past choices. More importantly, they should describe corrective emotional experiences, whether they have participated in Alcoholics Anonymous, attended a residential school, or suffered the injury or death of a companion due to self destructive behavior. To prove they have changed, recovering students can write credible essays which discuss five major points.

First, students need to accept responsibility for self-destructive acts by acknowledging they made poor choices. In so doing, applicants underscore their commitment to disciplined and mature behavior.

Second, they need to convince the admissions reader that they recognize the consequences and magnitude of past choices. They should discuss the pain their behaviors have caused to themselves, their family, and friends.

Third, these teenagers need to emphasize their commitment to change. By acknowledging the shame and humiliation they felt, these students display awareness that they need to continue to grow in order not to regress.

Fourth, they need to provide credible proof that they now are positive and responsible. Ideally, these teenagers assert that they are sober, value self-respect, and want to succeed. College admissions officers, rightfully so, will question if these positive attributes have been internalized by the applicant.

Fifth, students must articulate a philosophy of life that confirms they have not only learned from mistakes but also are committed to continue to improve. They need to include realistic intermediate and long-term goals regarding academic, personal, and social options.

The writer of the recommendation letter needs to confirm what the student has written. On the basis of professional training and experience, the advocate can document how corrective emotional experiences have helped students to focus their desires and energies towards success. For example, Bratter (2000 & 1993) describes how The John Dewey Academy, a therapeutic college preparatory school, has provided a setting in which many angry, gifted, self-destructive students have regained positive control of their lives. Working together, gifted, recovering students and their recommenders can, indeed, persuade top-ranked colleges to admit the students. Those students can enrich the quality of life at colleges and contribute in significant ways to bettering society.

REASONS TO REJECT RECOVERING STUDENTS

A college cannot admit all former self-destructive

teenagers. Admissions officers want to be assured that the student will not regress. No one can guarantee that the candidate will continue to grow; any applicant or writer who offers absolute assurances about recovery should be regarded as unreliable. The writer needs to persuade the college admissions officers that the adolescent can and will improve the moral fabric of the college or university through contributing both in class and on the campus. Admissions officers should be alert for several signs that students have not genuinely internalized new attitude and choices. When students remain preoccupied with the past, react defensively when questioned about current behavior, blame others for their problems, and/or have not formed credible personal and educational goals for themselves, they should be rejected. Students who minimize or rationalize past behavior should be viewed skeptically. Attitudes of entitlement, grandiosity, bitterness, or disrespect towards adults face unresolved and serious problems.

College admissions officers can disregard applicants whose stated desire to change is not convincing. Self-destructive youth have been deceitful manipulators who can be compelling for brief periods of time. Superior scores on standardized tests unconfirmed by grades or other achievements can signal pathologies concealed beneath a veneer of brilliance. Gifted and self-destructive students know how to rely on charm and charisma as a replacement for determination and hard work; admissions officers should be wary of a student who tries to manipulate them to feel sympathetic.

If questions linger about the student's credibility and commitment to change, admissions officers can, at the very least, contact the writer of the recommendation, who is probably in the best position to corroborate the student's claims. When a professional (a social worker, therapist, or Head of School) corroborates the student's commitment to change, it is reasonable to request that this confirmation be verified in writing.

Refusing to put a confirmation in writing may indicate that the professional doubts the applicant's commitment to stable, responsible, and honest behavior. If the candidate lacks credibility, the admissions professional can ask the student for permission to contact other sources for confirmation (the admissions officer can explain that the committee was so impressed with the file that it is seeking additional information). When there is no assurance of an applicant's assertions, the candidate should be rejected: The burden of proof lies upon the student and the high school, not the office of admission. If the college or university chooses to reject the candidate, the admissions officer is protected from legal action on the grounds of discrimination because there are objective reasons to justify rejection.

A PARTIAL SOLUTION: REPEAL THE CONFIDENTIALITY STATUTES

Current safeguards about the confidentiality of student

information, however well-intentioned, are placing colleges at risk. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act prohibit colleges from requesting information about alcoholism, substance abuse, and other self-destructive forms of behavior in order to prevent discrimination against persons with disabilities. White (1998) notes that the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education demands that colleges delete questions about "factors that might interfere with a student's performance, either from discipline, chronic illness, or emotional disability" (p. 8) which are relevant to the admissions process. Not all students deserve to be admitted to college. Attending college is a privilege to be earned, not a right guaranteed by the Constitution. Currently, the laws of confidentiality protect undeserving students from reasonable scrutiny by college admissions personnel while discriminating against those applicants who have worked diligently to succeed. These obstructive statutes need to be modified.

Language from *Nobay v. Princeton University* protects the right of a writer of recommendations to be honest. Bratter (1998) writes,

There are three facts. First, Princeton University was sued because the plaintiff was denied admission to medical school. Second, the Princeton graduate lied about his race, academic record, family history, and achievements by claiming speciously that he was "defamed" by Professor Jane Sharaf who accurately documented numerous inconsistencies and misrepresentations that...were not refuted in court. Third, the suit was based on an invasion of privacy and breach of contract because the plaintiff claimed that he was entitled to a positive recommendation. *Nobay v. Princeton University* indicates how flawed the legal system is. This was a frivolous suit; Princeton University should have been awarded legal fees. There was no breach of contract. On the contrary, no school or college can be compelled to write a positive, but dishonest, recommendation. The student failed to produce academically and was dishonest....This applicant did not deserve to be admitted. Many more qualified students were rejected by Dartmouth, Georgetown, Tufts, and Vanderbilt Medical Schools, so there is no basis for damages. Hopefully, *Nobay* will appeal this case so that it can be heard in a higher court and thus establish a precedent for writing candid, realistic letters of recommendation. Professor Sharaf, who wrote the recommendation, made five mistakes, none of which justify litigation. First, she failed to notify the applicant about her contents. Second, she should have mentioned that, in good conscience, she could not be his advocate. Third, she should have secured his permission to report the information before sending the letter. Without the applicant's written consent, no recommendation should be sent. Fourth, she should have suggested finding another person to endorse his application. Fifth, she should have notified the medical school after the fact about improprieties. U.S. District Judge Dominic J. Squatrito's rationale for dismiss-

ing the case needs to be emphasized: "Simply put," the Judge writes, "it's not outrageous to tell truthful statements about someone's fitness to practice medicine to those who have a need to know." (p. B9)

CONCLUSION: MODIFICATION OF THE LAW

The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (20 U.S.C. 1232(g); 20 U.S.C. 1232(h)) of 1974 inadvertently has exacerbated the problem of dishonesty. Though enacted to protect the privacy of students and their parents, the Act encourages dishonesty by not requiring applicants to disclose troubling aspects of their past behavior that might jeopardize their admission to college. Under these conditions, however, it is possible to tell the truth and still have a student accepted by a college of quality. For example, one student at the John Dewey Academy wrote an essay that seemed certain to disqualify him at Brown University by refusing others' revisions of his essay. The President of the school wrote the Dean of Admissions:

This will be the strangest recommendation that I have ever written. This is the kind of stuff which comprises the "twilight zone" that exists somewhere between reality and fantasy....Are honesty and integrity pathological in today's world?...Never have I encountered a student who...would refuse all advice because he felt it would be unfair to profit [from a distortion of the truth]....Is this admirable or insanity, stupidity or stubbornness?

I urge the Committee on Admissions to recognize that, unlike any other essay, Dan's is his. I know how important the personal statement is, but hope in his case it can be minimized since he scored 800 on his verbal SAT.

Brown University offered the applicant Early Action.

The battle to modify existing laws that protect confidentiality must be waged on the national level and supported by a wide range of professional associations. The American Counseling Association, the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, the National PTA, and others need to file *amicus curiae* briefs to the Supreme Court to support revising the law, since it inadvertently protects many students who do not deserve its protection. Congressmen and Senators are parents as well as legislators, so they have a vested interest in changing these aspects of the laws about confidentiality in the admissions process. Colleges, parents, and students who deserve admission to good colleges will profit from changing these laws.

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