Book Reviews

College Admission Practices around the World

Access to Higher Education. The report of the International Study of University Admissions. Frank Bowles. UNESCO, Paris; Columbia University Press, New York, 1963. xxix + 301 pp. Illus. $3.

The growing need for persons with technical and professional training and for well-informed and thoughtful leaders has led every nation with aspirations for development to place great demands on its educational system, and especially on its universities. The problems posed by this demand and by the increasing numbers of students seeking access to higher education are of concern not only to persons associated with colleges and universities, but to all thoughtful members of the community. A program of studies to provide a better understanding of the problems of higher education in various nations was instituted in 1959 by a joint steering committee of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization and the International Association of Universities. This volume is the report of Frank Bowles, the director of a 2-year study of college admissions practices which was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Bowles is president of the U.S. College Entrance Examination Board.

His report places in sharp contrast the problems in college admissions with which various countries are faced. In the United States, any bright youngster who aspires to attend college works his way through the application and admission rites and, in general, is admitted to some college or university, though perhaps not to his first choice. This short struggle during the latter years in high school works fairly well in matching students and institutions of higher learning in terms of the qualities and desires of both. That the bright young person does reach a point where he may apply, and that he may if necessary receive some financial assistance in order to attend college, is generally taken for granted in the United States.

This process, so familiar in this country, consistently encourages a student to continue his education, but such an open educational system is rarely found in other countries around the world. Many nations deliberately seek to reduce the numbers of students working toward university admissions, often beginning the elimination process during the early school years. Other nations have neither the facilities nor the qualified teachers to provide an opportunity for more than a small portion of their youth to test their academic capabilities or to develop aspirations for college work.

Increased access to higher education requires an increase in the educational facilities and in the number of qualified applicants seeking admission to educational institutions. From 1950 to 1960 university enrollments around the world increased by 71 percent. During the same period secondary school enrollments increased by 81 percent, and primary school enrollments by 57 percent. The increase in university enrollment is remarkable because it has not followed the increase in secondary school attendance, but has occurred simultaneously—ample evidence that forces for change have produced effects at all levels of education. All these changes affect the college admissions process by determining the size and nature of the ultimate pool of potential applicants.

That all levels of education must be viewed as parts of a coordinated program is clear from the analysis of educational systems presented in this report. In those systems which begin the selective process very early in the student's schooling (the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and India, for example), and in those which are much less selective (the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., for example), efforts to increase university enrollments have had an effect not only on institutions of higher learning, but also on all aspects of the educational program. The nature of these effects is outlined in a general framework and then described for a number of national systems.

In Ghana, for example, such a small proportion of the age group were in middle and primary schools that no adequate base for an admission group could be expected; national efforts produced an increase in enrollment from 204,000 in 1950 to 600,000 in 1960. In Japan in 1960, there were 750,000 applicants for 124,000 university openings, a situation that resulted in serious educational and political problems. In Chile, only 42 percent of the candidates in 1960 gained admission to institutions of higher education.

Studies of several national programs will be published as a series of monographs by UNESCO. Bowles's report is a careful analysis of the nature of the admissions process and a useful and interesting summary of the problems that occur during a period of great social change. The recommendations for action, which conclude the report, are simply stated and easily defended. In essence, they spell out the principle that "the emphasis in the final selection for entrance to higher education must be shifted from elimination to guidance. In short, the barriers must be rebuilt into gateways through which students may move with assurance that their preparation is appropriate to their choices, and that their opportunities are commensurate to their abilities" (from the last chapter).

The reader will be disappointed if he expects either a detailed account of the nature of admissions practices in every nation or a set of imaginative new proposals concerned with ways to improve access to higher education. But one cannot read this report without recognizing the complexities of the problem. Not only will the serious student of higher education find this report useful, but he will look forward to the more detailed analyses of national programs, which are to follow.

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