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STUDENTS

80 Selective Colleges Unveil Plans for a New Application — and Inspire Some Skepticism

By Eric Hoover | SEPTEMBER 29, 2015

A coalition of 80 selective public and private colleges announced plans on Monday to build a platform that would "streamline the experience of planning for and applying to college," according to the group's website.

As The Chronicle first reported last fall, participating institutions, including all eight Ivy League colleges and several public flagships, hope to "recast" the admissions process by forming a membership organization bound by specific requirements, building a shared application system, and engaging high-school students earlier with new online college-planning tools. Their goal: Inspiring "a stronger college-going mind-set" among more high-school students, especially those in underrepresented minority groups and those from low-income families.

As admissions officials and college counselors have heard more about the group's plans over the last few months, some observers have wondered whether the new venture marks a revolutionary shift in how students prepare for college — or whether it's just a noble-sounding branding campaign. Or both.

It's a fair question to keep in mind. After all, let's think about what has happened here: A bunch of big-name colleges with tremendous resources banded together, formed a club that only some colleges can join, and boldly dubbed themselves the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success. That surely will invite plenty of scrutiny of the group's plans, and what it ultimately delivers.

That's not to say no one involved is thinking big. Jeremiah Quinlan, who has helped lead the coalition's efforts so far, thinks the admissions process is overdue for innovation. "Technology has totally changed the back end of our process, but not the front end," said Mr. Quinlan, dean of undergraduate admissions at Yale University. "This is really an ambitious effort to rethink the timeline and the inputs for students."

The group intends to do that in three ways. First, the new application platform would enable students to complete a basic application form, just as they do on the Common Application. Colleges would be free to "personalize" any additional admissions criteria. So member institutions grouped under the same banner would maintain a good deal of autonomy. (Participating colleges that are members of the Common Application plan to continue using it as well.)

Plans for the platform also include a "digital portfolio" where as early as ninth grade students could put their favorite essays, notes on extracurricular pursuits, thoughts on college — anything that might help them later on. The idea, Mr. Quinlan said, is to demystify the admissions process, encouraging students to think of college-planning over a long period of time, well before they must meet application deadlines.

Through a "collaboration platform," students could choose whether to grant access to that information to others: counselors, teachers, and advisers from community-based organizations. Those whom students invite into their portfolios could offer advice and monitor the students' progress, according to documents describing the group's plans.

Not every high school has a strong college-counseling program, or expensive college-planning tools like Naviance. "We're trying to create a college-planning culture, especially for students who haven't had these kinds of tools," said Zina L. Evans, vice president for enrollment at the University of Florida, which is a member of the group. "This is not just, 'Here's another app to choose from.' It's an opportunity for students to think about this process not just as a single transaction that happens during the fall semester of senior year."

What's 'Affordable'?

It's hard to find anyone who doesn't support expanding opportunities for low-income

students. But attracting more of them isn't the same thing as admitting more of them — or offering them aid packages that make attendance possible.

Some admissions officials questioned the group's membership policies. Participating private colleges must meet domestic students' "full, demonstrated financial need," according to the coalition's website.

Some of the coalition's members have need-aware admissions policies. So, of course, they can meet full need. How, exactly, participating institutions go about doing that is apparently up to them, so students and their parents could end up with loans that might call definitions of "affordability" into question.

"The criteria for joining the coalition do not seem very selective," an admissions official at a private college in New England wrote in a private message to The Chronicle on Monday. "I can think of institutions (including my own) that ... could switch to a need-aware review strategy and easily meet 100 percent of demonstrated need." The official, who said he could not speak for his college, added: "I'm not sure how it really helps expand access."

Jon Boeckenstedt, associate vice president for enrollment management and marketing at DePaul University, was blunt. "Many of these institutions don't really stand for access, based on the low number of Pell Grant students they enroll," he said. "It sounds really good, it's a brilliant PR stroke, but some of these institutions have done the most to keep poor kids out, by this ridiculous reliance on things like test scores that only measure achievement and don't measure merit in any way, shape, or form."

The membership requirements for public institutions are also a bit murky. The coalition's website says they must have "affordable tuition," but that's far from an objective measure. More clear: All institutions must graduate 70 percent of their students within six years, a rate that excludes hordes of public institutions, including those that serve large numbers of low-income and first-generation students.

"The problem with the graduation cutoff is it's as much about inputs as anything else," Nancy Leopold said in an interview this month. "The schools that may be working the hardest with the kids least likely to be successful are the ones that aren't going to be in this

thing."

Ms. Leopold, executive director of CollegeTracks, a Maryland organization that helps students from low-income families apply to college, had mixed feelings about the group's plans. She liked the sound of the portfolio, the possibility of opening up more discussions of college with students who need the most help. But she thought the platform would need tools that help families understand college costs and determine what they will have to pay.

"I applaud any effort that engages a disadvantaged kid in thinking about college as something that's possible," she said. "But in a world where getting through the process is hard enough, there's a higher duty here to make sure that however you're engaging ninth graders serves them educationally. Otherwise it's all marketing."

Taking On the Common App

What the emergence of a new rival might mean for the Common Application could become an intriguing storyline over the next few years. The standardized admissions form used by more than 600 colleges worldwide has long dominated the college-admissions realm.

But it's raising the college-access flag, too. Recently, the organization bolstered the college-planning resources for students on its website, including information specifically for middle-school students and ninth graders. It's planning to roll out "virtual counselor" materials, including articles and videos that answer specific questions about the application process, said Aba G. Blankson, director of communications for the Common Application.

Although the Common App's leaders have discussed the possibility of adding a "locker," perhaps similar to the coalition's digital portfolio for students, such a change might not happen. "While it sounds like a good idea," Ms. Blankson wrote in an email, "if not handled properly it will create a great deal of added stress and anxiety and — worse — could become one of those well-intended ideas that has the unintended consequence of further stacking the deck against underresourced students."

Like many admissions officials who were not yet familiar with all of the coalition's plans, W. Kent Barnds said he wanted to learn more. "But, at first blush, I think their objective to 'transform' the process, although noble, is unlikely," Mr. Barnds, vice president for enrollment, communication, and planning at Augustana College, in Illinois, wrote in an email on Monday. "I think the Common Application remains too strong and too member-centered to enable a real competition to challenge them."

Then again, competition could end up helping students. "Choice is good, innovation is good, this brings together both of them," said Mr. Quinlan, at Yale.

One dean of admissions whose institution considered joining the new application platform had a much different take. "I'm not convinced about the true intentions of the coalition," the dean, who works at an East Coast college, wrote in an email to The Chronicle. "How does creating yet another application, yet another hurdle, and yet another process for students and counselors to learn and manage, create access?"

The dean, who shared his thoughts on the condition that his name not be published, said his college had opted not to sign up. The participating colleges, he wrote, are using their "money and power" to create an exclusive system: "The schools participating in this effort should not mask their intentions under the guise of 'access.' It's a deceiving marketing ploy, but in the end, they will win. The elite colleges always do."

Some enrollment officials, however, offered a more-balanced assessment of the new coalition's potential. Michael Beseda, vice president for enrollment and university communications at Willamette University, said he wasn't a fan of the group's exclusivity, but hoped it would broaden over time. "These institutions could learn a lot about access and success," he wrote in an email, "from other fine institutions that have more limited financial resources and yet still enroll and graduate much higher levels of financially needy and/or first-generation students."

Still, Mr. Beseda likes the "educational richness" of the proposed application platform. "As long as it remains a resource for all students, not just those with the privileges, resources, and coaching ... it could be a valuable addition to the admission process."

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the meaning of Animal House, among other issues. He's on Twitter @erichoov, and his email address is eric.hoover@chronicle.com.

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