

## Admissions Practices and Research: Alternatives for Progress

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Guest Editors

This special section contains a selection of the articles presented at the International Conference on Admissions to Higher Education organized by the Ministry of Education of Chile through the Division of Higher Education. The conference was held in Santiago, Chile on June 7, 2012 and gathered national and international experts with the aim of fostering dialogue between academics and decision makers. Articles presented at the conference will be gathered in a book, which will be edited and published by the Ministry of Education of Chile in December 2012.

The potential benefits of a possible expansion of the criteria to consider in the admissions process for higher education to include measures such as essay-type tests, high school ranking and indicators of noncognitive skills of applicants, make these worthy of attention. At present the process of admission to the most selective higher education institutions in Chile considers performance on a standardized test (Prueba de Selección Universitaria, PSU) to a large degree and grades reflecting school education (Notas de Enseñanza Media, NEM) to a much smaller degree. While the use of standardized tests is justified by the need to compare the performance of applicants using similar criteria and conditions, it may be more difficult to justify that results in these tests determine almost 80% of the admission decision. In countries like the United States, Great Britain and Sweden, performance on standardized tests is usually considered just one of the antecedents of the applicant, and while it is an important antecedent, other academic and personal records are considered as well. The need to evaluate other dimensions of the applicant's profile in the admission decision is more evident in light of the gaps observed in all types of educational measurements between students of different socioeconomic levels.

Having a common, centralized and standardized admissions system for more than 30 universities provides benefits that are important to underline: taking advantage of economies of scale, development, implementation and correction of common tools generates savings compared with a situation where potentially every educational program or institution applies their own instruments. The application process for institutions and programs is also easier to navigate for students and their families, which is an especially important factor for first-generation university students. However, it is important to acknowledge that higher education institutions may have different missions that motivate their actions, and they can, therefore, legitimately seek students with certain profiles. This motivation to find a better fit between institutional missions and student profiles justifies the need to have a space for admissions based on specific criteria for each institution.

Furthermore, the criteria used for admission to higher education play a dual role. They express institutional agreement regarding the minimum criteria necessary for a student to successfully complete tertiary studies. They also provide powerful signals to the primary and secondary school system regarding the attributes and skills that are valued by higher education institutions. It is those attributes that will be reinforced with greater emphasis during the final years of secondary education, modifying the curriculum and time allocation of students both inside and outside the classroom. A greater variety of admission criteria and greater consistency between these and secondary education objectives would facilitate the transition of students and the work of school.

There are various national initiatives that have recently made innovations in the development of instruments that could be used, or are being used, in admission to higher education: essay-type tests, specific consideration of the ranking of secondary school graduation and measurements of noncognitive skills. Some of these efforts have been promoted by the Ministry of Education and others by the educational institutions themselves. We believe it is important to learn from these experiences and enrich this learning with international experiences in this area. At present there are important lessons to be learned from the use of essay-type tests in admissions, admission plans based on school ranking (percent plans), and measurements of noncognitive skills in the United States and other parts of the world.

The special section includes articles on three areas relevant to the admissions process for Chilean higher education institutions where there is recent international research which can be learned from, in addition to national experiences. These areas combine the interest in predicting academic performance with equity in access to higher education institutions and are especially relevant in the discussions on admissions and access to higher education that have taken place in our country in recent years. These three areas are:

1. The role of standardized cognitive tests in admissions decisions.
2. The consideration of secondary school graduation ranking or the relative position of a student based on their grades in admissions decisions.
3. The measurement and consideration of noncognitive skills in the educational field.

In the first area, Rebecca Zwick's paper, *The Role of Admissions Test Scores, Socioeconomic Status, and High School Grades in Predicting College Achievement* deals with the role of standardized tests, secondary school grades and socioeconomic variables in prediction of the university experience. This has been a long and intense discussion both in academia and in society in general. Dr. Zwick describes the arguments most commonly put forward by both sides of the debate in a simple but solid manner by using multiple methodologies and data from various tests.

The consideration of high school ranking in admissions processes is tackled next in an article that summarizes North American experiences and in two articles that present national programs. The article by Catherine Horn, *Percent Plan Admissions: Their Strengths and Challenges in Furthering an Equity Agenda*, describes the experience of admissions programs based on student rankings (percent plans) implemented in the United States. Dr. Horn discusses their strengths and weaknesses in promoting equity in access to higher education based on the literature accumulated during the 10 years in which these programs have been in operation in California, Florida and Texas. The lessons learned from these experiences are particularly important in the current debate on the consideration of ranking in the admissions process at the higher education institutions grouped in the Council of Chancellors of Chilean Universities (Consejo de Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas, CRUCH).

The following two articles present examples of national initiatives inspired by programs that consider high school ranking in their admissions processes and are motivated by increasing the access of lower income groups to selective institutions. The paper written by Rosa Devés, Claudio Castro, Maribel Mora and Rodrigo Roco describes the new program Priority Access System for Educational Equity at the University of Chile. This means of admission considers the student ranking on graduating from secondary education, among other criteria, and has been implemented especially for students from municipal schools and the first three income quintiles. The new Priority Access System for Educational Equity is based on the experience accumulated under the *Cupo de Equidad* (Equal Admission Quota) Program of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the same university between 2009 and 2011.

Francisco Javier Gil and Consuelo del Canto, in their article *The Case of the Propedéutico Program at Universidad de Santiago de Chile (USACH)*, then present national evidence to argue in favor of considering ranking of secondary education graduation in decisions on admissions to higher education institutions. One of the key pieces of their argument is the successful experience of the *Propedéutico* program at the Universidad de Santiago de Chile. This was started in 2007 as a parallel means of admission in which disadvantaged students in the top 10% of their class were admitted without requiring standardized admission tests, but with the obligation of having attended and passed a study program specially designed for them and taught on Saturday mornings. The project began with a cohort of 50 students admitted to the USACH and has been expanded to a total of nine universities. This initiative is supported by UNESCO and Fundación Equitas.

Lastly, Patrick Kyllonen, in his article *The Importance of Higher Education and the Role of Noncognitive Attributes in College Success*, refers to the third topic covered in the conference and the special section. His paper presents the observed recent consensus in the academic and educational community about the importance of noncognitive skills in predicting academic and career success. The article also describes the most promising ways of measuring these attributes, differentiating them according to the use that will be given to the results of these measurements. Dr. Kyllonen bases his analysis on various surveys of educators and employers, as well as longitudinal studies that examine the ability to predict economic income and risk behaviors using measurements of noncognitive skills.

This set of articles represents an effort to gather the highlights of recent national and international research on admissions issues, as well as the most innovative practices developed in our local context in terms of admissions to selective institutions. We hope that reading these articles encourages reflection on possible courses of action and initiatives that allow the objectives of predictability and equity in admission to higher education institutions to be better balanced.