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Viewpoint: Toward a head-on collision

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Viewpoint

Toward a head-on collision

The two dominant trends in education today are moving toward a head-on collision. There is a strong likelihood, which begins to look like a certainty, that the recently revived interest in improving the standards and quality of high school and college education will fall victim to the demographic reality of a shrinking youth population. What prospect is there that high schools and colleges will raise their requirements when the loss of students might mean closing their doors?

As the last of the baby-boom generation advances to high school graduation age, they leave in their wake a legacy of closed elementary and secondary schools. Now the specter of contracting enrollments has reached the colleges, and scores of them are likely to go out of business during the next decade. No one can be sure what will determine which will survive.

A few rugged individualists, like John Silber of Boston University, have declared that the road to salvation lies in raising standards and offering a strong, liberal education that concentrates on developing intelligence rather than specific skills. But other university officials believe the day of the liberal arts college is over and the future belongs to those with career-oriented programs.

The dynamics of college admissions has been reversed by the receding demographic tide. No longer do students sweat out the day of reckoning when colleges send out admissions notices, unless they are applying to one of the nation's dwindling number of competitive colleges, now only 8 percent of all post-secondary institu-

tions. High school seniors find their mailboxes clogged with enticing appeals from dozens of colleges eager to recruit them. At last count by the College Board, 34 percent of the institutions accepted everyone who applied—regardless of previous academic experience—and more than half admitted everyone who met their qualifications, which included most or all who applied.

Already, the bidding for warm bodies has become intense. In June, New York City's massive City University approved a program to offer students up to 25 percent of their graduation credit for their "life experience." In doing so, City University joined a host of other institutions around the country that have hit upon "life experience" credits as a marketing device to woo adult enrollees into higher education, with the functional equivalent of a discount. It doesn't take much life experience to realize that a program with great potential for abuse is likely to lead to abuse, as colleges compete to outdo each other with irresistible offers for the student shopper. The ultimate bargain, of course, will be 100 percent credit for "life experience," and the lucky takers will merely have to enroll and pay their tuition in exchange for their degree and their willingness to be counted for financial purposes as a "full-time equivalent."

It is ironic that the same shoddy educational practices that won currency during the 1960s, when colleges were bursting with record enrollments, will now be justified because of declining enrollments. Faced with the fear of losing precious students, schools will have difficulty setting high standards, resisting grade inflation, imposing requirements for admission or graduation and eliminating trivia from the curriculum. Without requirements, students shop around for a teacher who gives take-home examinations (or none at all) and asks for minimal reading and optional essays. It is not unusual for students to drop out of a course on the first day if the professor expects the students to do too much work, nor is it unusual for a term paper to be delivered a year after the date it was due.

Despite evidence that colleges are reshaping their curriculum to restore requirements in subjects like English and mathematics, it seems unlikely that many will brave extinction by setting admission requirements that actually exclude prospective students. From the colleges' perspective, this is understandable, but it undercuts the efforts at the high school level to reintroduce the elements of a common curriculum.

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