


CHAPTER 2

RETHINKING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES

While recruitment strategies (addressed in [Chapter 1](#)) determine how institutions proactively interact with prospective students, demonstrated interest policies are the reverse, gauging applicants' interactions with the institution. Demonstrated—or applicant—interest is broadly defined as the contact students make with a college that signals their preference to enroll if admitted.¹ Students can demonstrate interest in an institution in many ways, including visiting campus, attending on- and off-campus information sessions, participating in interviews, calling admissions offices, and applying via early application deadlines. Some institutions consider signals of interest from students engaging with the university's website, reading emails sent from the school, and clicking on links in emails.²



"What about the low-income, first-gen[eration students] [and others], how do we make sure they don't get lost?"

**—Michael Walsh, dean of admissions,
James Madison University**

Recruitment strategies and demonstrated interest policies are intertwined. Students who are actively recruited by institutions—for example, through high school visits or college fairs—have more opportunities than those who are not to demonstrate their interest in attending a specific college or university. As noted in the [previous chapter](#), flagship and other selective public institutions often recruit out-of-state students, primarily from wealthy and predominantly White high schools, to generate revenue, to the neglect of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, underrepresented AAPI, rural, and non-wealthy high school students.³ Consequently, demonstrated interest policies, in which an institution considers this interest in admissions decisions, reinforce inequities baked into institutional recruitment strategies can further limit access for underserved students.

Furthermore, when any institution—even those with equitable recruitment strategies in place—considers demonstrated interest in admissions decisions, it privileges students who can afford to visit campus.⁴ Travel costs make participating in on-campus events too costly and difficult to access for many rural students and students from low-income backgrounds.⁵ For example, at one medium-sized selective university, 81 percent of students who made in-person visits to catch the eye of college recruiters identified as White and lived relatively close to campus.⁶

The inequities of demonstrated interest policies extend beyond in-person campus visits. White students, those from families with relatively high incomes, and those living in suburban areas are more likely than their peers who live in rural and underserved communities to have access to broadband and other technology required to engage virtually with admissions officers.⁷ As a result, more privileged students also have greater access to off-campus opportunities that indicate interest. Further, intricate knowledge of the college admissions process—and the fact that institutions may be tracking engagement with their emails, for example—is more readily available to White, high-income, or non-first-generation students. They are more likely to have access to college counselors,⁸ institutional representatives visiting their high school,⁹ and networks of adults with postsecondary experience.¹⁰



Demonstrated Interest and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced institutions to adapt many of their long-standing policies and practices. With stay-at-home orders, travel bans, and social distancing requirements, institutions had to rethink the opportunities available for students to demonstrate interest and how interest is factored into admissions decisions. Moving forward, colleges and universities should consider making permanent changes that improve equity, such as treating virtual campus visits or interviews like on-campus engagements. This is especially important given that experts in the field suggest that “demonstrated interest is likely to get more emphasis in the current environment,” because, when faced with unpredictability, enrollment-reliant institutions are likely to prioritize students who they expect will attend if admitted.¹¹

INSTITUTIONS USE DEMONSTRATED INTEREST TO PREDICT ENROLLMENTS, INCREASE YIELD, AND DECREASE ACCEPTANCE RATES

Many colleges use demonstrated interest to determine who is most interested in attending if admitted and, in turn, to predict enrollments, increase yield rates, and lower acceptance rates.¹² Data show that nearly one-third (31 percent) of selective public institutions—those that are well-resourced to support underserved students’ success—consider demonstrated interest in admissions decisions, as do approximately two-thirds (67 percent) of private nonprofit institutions (Figure 2.1). Also, while more than half of campuses weigh students’ work experience when making admissions decisions—a factor that could benefit students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds—more institutions consider demonstrated interest an important or very important factor than work experience (Figure 2.2).

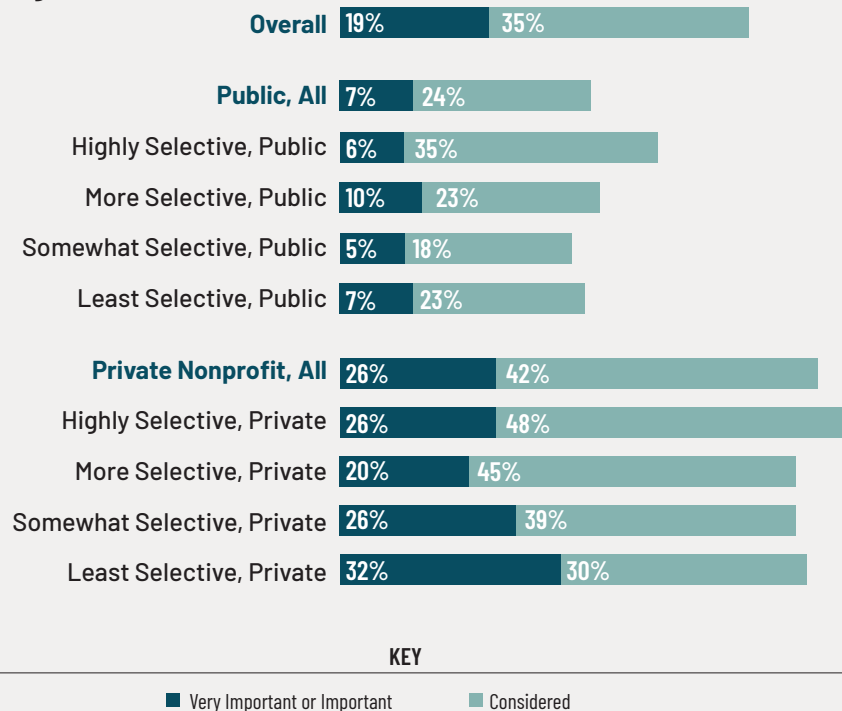
Defining Yield

Yield is the share of students who choose to enroll at a college or university after being admitted.¹³

students enrolled / # students admitted

FIGURE 2.1

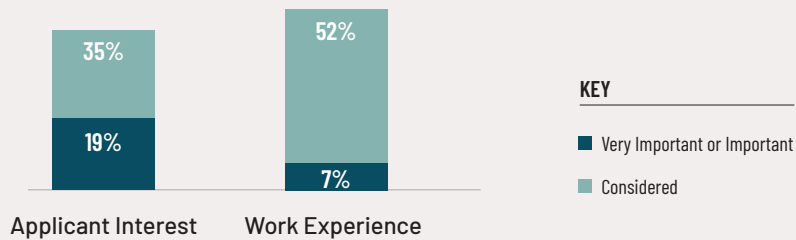
Colleges’ Consideration of Applicant Interest in Admissions, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson’s as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. Selectivity categories generated from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). See [technical appendix](#) for detailed methodology.

FIGURE 2.2

Importance of Applicant Interest and Work Experience in College Admissions, Among Selective Four-Year Colleges



Source: Institute for Higher Education Policy analysis of Undergraduate & Undergraduate Financial Aid Databases compiled by Peterson's as part of the Common Data Set Initiative, 2019. Note: Excludes colleges with open admissions, for-profit institutions, and military academies. See technical appendix for detailed methodology.

Some institutions measure applicant interest even if they do not officially consider that interest in admissions decisions.

By admitting applicants who are more likely to accept their offer, institutions can increase their yield and reduce their acceptance rate, which helps them appear more selective and prestigious.¹⁴ In practice, this can play out in two ways. Demonstrated interest may be more important when making admissions decisions for students with high test scores who are likely to have many options when deciding where to enroll. For these students, signaling a strong interest in a particular school increases that institution's confidence they will choose to attend. In fact, demonstrated interest has been shown empirically to correlate more strongly with admissions for such students.¹⁵ On the other hand, institutions may consider applicant interest when making decisions about whether to admit borderline applicants—students near the cutoff between those typically admitted and those who are not.¹⁶

Some institutions measure applicant interest even if they do not officially consider that interest in admissions decisions. They do so to predict yield more accurately at the admissions cycle's onset, which helps them prevent under- or over-enrolling their incoming class.¹⁷ Increases in the number of applications colleges receive have made it more difficult to predict which applicants are likely to enroll if admitted,¹⁸ so many institutions engage in a delicate balancing act that leads them to seek information about who wants to attend.



First-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds often do not have equitable access to college counselors who can advise them that institutions consider demonstrated interest.

DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES ARE MOST BENEFICIAL TO STUDENTS WHO KNOW ABOUT THEM

The Varsity Blues scandal revealed that applicants from wealthy families are often aware of tactics (both legal and illegal) to help them achieve their college admissions goals.¹⁹ Demonstrated interest policies are one legal tactic institutions offer students to increase their chances of admission, and the greatest benefits go to students who know these policies exist and can adapt their behavior accordingly.

Tracking Applicant Interest

While it is clear that many institutions consider demonstrated interest in admissions decisions, it is less clear how they track and assess interest. For example, Seton Hall University gives students who show interest a score between 0 and 100, calculated using approximately 80 variables, including how early in high school applicants started viewing the university's website, how long they spend on the site, and whether they open emails from the institution.²⁰ As colleges and universities adjusted to restrictions on in-person engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they relied more heavily on online engagement, such as virtual tours, signing up for mailing lists, opening emails, and clicking on links.²¹ These virtual engagements could hold promise for students who cannot afford to travel to campus, but institutions must remain attuned to accessibility for applicants without broadband or home computer access.

Students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college-goers are least likely to have access to information about demonstrated interest practices. Parents or other family members who have gone to college are more familiar with the college process and are likely better equipped to explain to students how it is structured, how it works, and how to prepare.²² Likewise, for many students, college counselors in high schools are a primary source of information about the application process, including the importance of demonstrating interest using the strategies institutions are most likely to value.²³ However, huge caseloads can overburden college counselors at under-resourced high schools,²⁴ limiting students' access to information about practices that will increase their college admissions chances. This is especially true in schools that serve high proportions of low-income and first-generation students.²⁵ Put simply, this suggests that first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to hear the "inside scoop" on the importance of clicking links in emails, regularly visiting an institution's website, or visiting campus.²⁶

Inequities within High School College Counseling

High school college counselors play an important role in the college admissions process, and a more equitable higher education system requires more equitable access to these critical resources. Unfortunately, many high school counselors have limited appointment availability to assist low-income and first-generation students with college applications.²⁷ This is particularly true in public high schools, mainly due to large student caseloads and competing work priorities.²⁸ For example, in the 2018–19 academic year, only 29 percent of public high schools reported employing at least one counselor (full or part time) whose exclusive responsibility was to provide college counseling, compared with 48 percent of private high schools.²⁹ Overall, public high school counselors also report spending less time on college counseling than counselors at private high schools (19 percent compared with 31 percent of their time, respectively).³⁰ Counselors at high schools where more students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch report spending less time on college counseling than those at schools with more affluent student bodies.³¹

MOST OPPORTUNITIES TO SIGNAL INTEREST ARE NOT EQUALLY ACCESSIBLE, AND ON-CAMPUS ENGAGEMENTS ARE PARTICULARLY INEQUITABLE

Applicants can demonstrate their interest in two main ways: off-campus engagements and on-campus engagements. Off-campus engagements can include making phone calls to an admissions office, attending locally held or online information sessions, or interacting with an institution via website or email. On-campus engagements require campus visits, including going on a tour, attending an information session, or speaking with a faculty member or admissions counselor one-on-one.³² While students can demonstrate their interest in several ways, admissions decisions tend to be more favorable for students who undertake these potentially costly on-campus visits. One study found that students who make on-campus contacts—alone or in combination with off-campus contacts—at a medium-sized, highly selective university were more likely to be admitted, a pattern which disadvantages students from low-income backgrounds or rural areas who may not have the time and money to make such visits.³³

On-campus engagements require substantial investments of time and money, making it difficult for rural students and students from low-income backgrounds to participate.



When institutions value costly on-campus engagements more highly than lower cost off-campus engagements, they advantage well-off students and contribute to socioeconomic inequities in college access. Students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have the resources necessary to participate in on-campus engagements and receive the boost in their chances of admission that comes with such engagements. For example, students and families from low-income backgrounds may not have the means to travel to campus or the ability to take time off of work to do so.

Aside from on-campus visits, an overwhelming majority of institutions consider email interactions, website visits, and participating in high school visits as the top three engagements of considerable importance.³⁴ While speaking with an admissions officer during a high school visit can be less costly than traveling to campus, research shows that institutions are less likely to visit rural, low-income, and Black, Latinx, or Indigenous communities, opting instead for White and affluent neighborhoods in major metropolitan areas (see [Chapter 1](#)).³⁵ Students cannot demonstrate interest through a high school visit unless the institution chooses to visit their high school. It also is clear that even virtual recruitment events are not equally accessible to all students: only 63 percent of adults in rural communities and 56 percent of low-income adults reported having broadband access at home,³⁶ patterns which could limit some students' ability to engage via email, visit a college's website, or participate remotely in a campus tour or information session.

Rural students and students from low-income backgrounds have few opportunities to demonstrate their interest in an institution via meaningful off-campus engagements.

In sum, demonstrated interest can be used to predict enrollment—but it can also be misused in ways that reinforce historical inequities in our higher education system. To benefit from demonstrated interest policies, students must know the opportunities exist and how to take advantage of them—and have the means to do so. Affluent students with access to college counselors, whether high school or private, and family members who have graduated from college can work the system and strengthen their admissions chances via demonstrated interest policies. However, these opportunities are not necessarily open to students who lack the resources to travel to campus or who happen to live in neighborhoods oft ignored by institutional recruitment strategies.

Students cannot demonstrate interest through a high school visit unless the institution chooses to visit their high school.





OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: RETHINK DEMONSTRATED INTEREST

Many institutions make decisions about who they will admit based on the likelihood that students will enroll, but these demonstrated interest policies are inherently inequitable. Advancing equity requires university leaders to make tough decisions that rid their campuses of policies that disproportionately benefit students who have traditionally had access to postsecondary education and exclude those who have not.

TO IMPROVE EQUITY IN THEIR ADMISSIONS POLICIES AND, THROUGHOUT THEIR CAMPUS CULTURE, INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

RETHINK CONSIDERING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST WHEN MAKING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS:

Left unchecked, demonstrated interest policies perpetuate privilege and can exclude qualified candidates. Institutions should not consider demonstrated interest when deciding whether to admit an applicant, unless paired with extensive training for admissions staff to appropriately contextualize applicants' interest and deliberate, equity-minded recruitment strategies to level the playing field.

IF USING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES, INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

ENSURE ALL STUDENTS CAN MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE WITH THE INSTITUTION DURING THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS:

Institutions should recruit students from diverse locations and backgrounds by ensuring on- and off-campus engagements are available to all students. For example, institutions should subsidize on-campus visits for students from low-income backgrounds who may not otherwise have the resources to participate.³⁷ And they should do everything in their power to ensure that students from low-income backgrounds and rural students have equitable opportunities to demonstrate their interest in the most effective ways.³⁸

STOP PRIORITIZING ON-CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT:

Rural students and students from low-income backgrounds are significantly disadvantaged by policies that reward costly on-campus engagements, like taking a campus tour or attending an on-campus information session. Institutions should not value on-site contacts more than high-impact off-campus engagements, like calling or emailing the admissions office or attending a local college fair.

IF USING DEMONSTRATED INTEREST POLICIES, INSTITUTIONS SHOULD:

RECRUIT IN DIVERSE LOCATIONS:

Regardless of whether they consider applicant interest in admissions decisions, institutions should recruit students from diverse locations. It is even more incumbent on institutions to diversify their recruitment efforts if they advantage students who attend a college fair or meet with an admissions counselor in these decisions.

INCREASE TRANSPARENCY ABOUT HOW DEMONSTRATED INTEREST IS CALCULATED AND CONSIDERED:

Colleges and universities must be intentional and transparent about communicating all of the factors that inform an admissions decision.



CHAPTER 2 ENDNOTES

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