Student Development During the College Application Process

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Abstract

As seniors in high school apply to college every fall, they enter a new phase of development. However, no current literature discusses what this process looks like for the student in terms of their decision-making processes. In order to address this gap in literature, this paper will use existing theories to examine the student development during this time in the students' lives.

Keywords

College application, high school senior, student development, common application, college choice, college decisions, college enrollment

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Suggested citation:
Doyle, E. (2020). Student development through the college application process. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 58-67.

Introduction

Every August, incoming high school seniors across the country apply to college. While the process itself looks similar for the majority of applications, the experience widely varies for the individual students. The developmental phases students go through when deciding which colleges and universities to apply to and ultimately attend are the key points that will be explored in this paper. A discussion of relevant terms used in the paper and then a review of current literature will follow, focusing on Jackson's (1982) and Hossler's (1985) models. A new theory will be proposed addressing gaps in current research, using Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory on self-authorship and Marcia's (1966, 1980) theory on ego identity statuses and integrate them with current implications of the common application and its effect on risk-seeking and risk-averse students.

Although there is current literature on the process a student goes through when applying to college, most of it neglects to discuss which student populations take risks when applying to colleges versus which students apply to mostly safety schools. With the introduction of the Common Application in 1975, studies show that institutions have higher numbers of applications and a higher enrollment rate (Gross, 2013). Additionally, it could be useful to view the process a student goes through with an economical lens; identifying opportunity costs and value of risks versus potential gain for the student.

Definition of Terms

Below are several definitions that are relevant when understanding this phenomenon and summarizing it to theory. These terms will be used throughout the rest of the paper, with the most relevant being cognitive heuristics and the terms reach school, match school, and safety school.

Cognitive Heuristics

Cognitive heuristics are defined as "simple strategies or 'rules of thumb' that people use when making judgments (Nisbett & Ross, 1980)" (Smith, 1988, p. 13). Generally, this can also refer to the contents of the search space that someone is using, i.e. what information is able to be a person's brain readily. This theory will be using certain aspects of cognitive heuristics, such as availability and representativeness.

Match School

A match school is a school that is likely to admit a student because their scores, grades, and general characteristics are similar to the student population at that institution (Grove, 2018b). This means that a student can apply to a match school and feel safe about their admission — though this does not mean it is guaranteed.

Reach School

A reach school can be defined as a school that a student could potentially get into, but the student's scores, grades, and other admissions materials are lower than the average admitted student's materials (Grove, 2018a). Here, we can also classify highly selective institutions as reach schools because students who are matches for this institution may still not get in due to low acceptance rates.

Safety School

A safety school can be defined as a school that a student will almost definitely get accepted to because a student's scores, grades, and other admissions materials are significantly above average for the institution's admitted student population (Grove, 2018c). These institutions also generally have high acceptance rates.

Opportunity Cost

Opportunity cost "refers to what you have to give up to buy what you want in terms of other goods or services" (Opportunity Cost, n.d.). Here it can refer to students' time taken to complete an application compared to the perceived value of the application. Perceived value can be affected depending if the school is a match, safety, or reach school. This is seen with the common application, as generally the opportunity cost is negligible when selecting institutions to send an application to.

Risk-averse and Risk-seeking

Risk-averse and risk-seeking refers to people's comfort with risk. Someone who is risk-averse can be defined as someone who prefers to know the risks associated with a decision (Ops, 2014). This could be represented as students who apply to "match" and "safety" schools where they are more likely to be accepted than applying to "reach" schools. Someone who is risk-seeking can be defined as someone who would prefer an uncertain outcome versus ones with expected or anticipated outcomes (Ops, 2014). This could be represented as students who apply to "reach" institutions.

Literature Review

Current literature discusses theories on what students experience when they attend college and then literature on how the common application has affected the admissions process. There is not direct research on what certain populations choose which kinds of universities to apply to, though there is some research that could lead one to ascertain what types of students apply to various universities. Existing theories can be aligned with some of the college application models in order to examine the developmental aspect.

The literature review will consist of existing theories regarding college choice and the process that the student goes through, specifically focusing on Jackson's (1982) and Hossler's (1985) models on college choice. Additionally, I review some current trends of college application systems, such as the common application. Finally, a discussion of current student development theories will be used to connect development to these existing college choice theories.

The Use of Cognitive Heuristics in College Choice

Jackson's (1982) model focuses on how a student goes through the college choice process in three phases: preference, exclusion, and evaluation. The preference phase focuses on what he refers to as "stable" variables, i.e. things in a student's life that cannot be changed. This includes aspects such as race, sex/gender, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics of the student's life. These can develop preferences for certain colleges. The second phase, exclusion, the preferences are weighed and compared to institutions to develop a college list. The final phase is evaluation, and this is where the student starts to develop rankings in the college list. Here, the student starts to compare programs and costs.

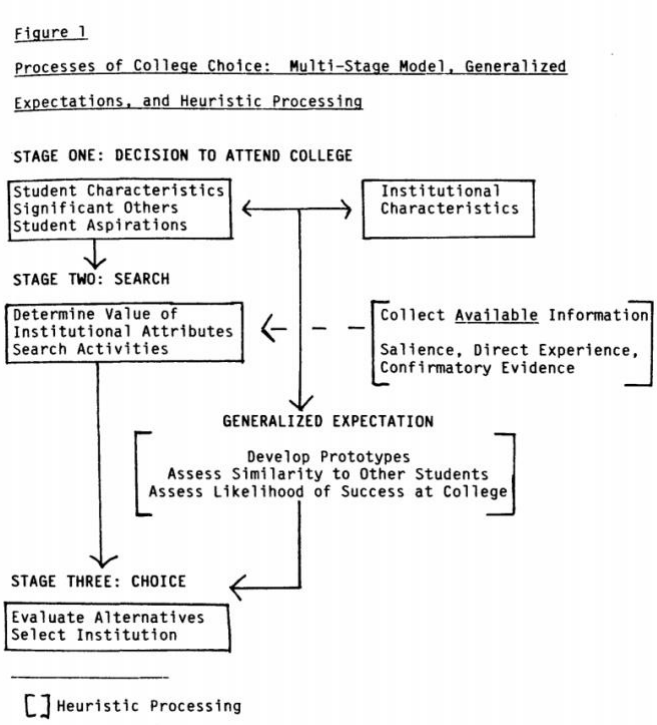
Hossler's (1985) model also has three phases: predisposition, search, and choice. Hossler compares the college selection process to a funnel, broad at the top and slowly gets narrower. The first phase in his model focuses on certain student characteristics, similar to the "stable variables" in Jackson's (1982) model that creates a predisposition for the student to attend college. The second phase, search, is when the student creates their choice set by examining college characteristics and comparing them to their own values. The final phase, choice, is when the student decides which college to attend.

In Smith's (1988) article, they discuss how many of the existing theories suggest that students have a rational way of making these decisions, and there are several studies to show that students follow a predictable method when creating choice sets, such as college lists. There are a few theorists that discuss this belief may be too broad. Litten (1982) discusses that models such as Jackson's do not go into detail about evaluation or the student's development when deciding which institution to apply to and/or attend. Additionally, Chapman (1981) believes that a more accurate model of college choice is when the expectation that the student has on college is influential with the choice they choose.

Cognitive heuristics are "frequently used in situations involving complex decisions such as estimating the likelihood or frequency of an uncertain event's occurrence (e.g., success in college, chances of admission)" (Smith, 1988, p. 13). Smith (1988) argues that there are two specific types of cognitive heuristics that could be relevant when discussing college choice: availability (and simulation) and representativeness. Availability heuristics are relevant because they have implications on what kinds of information students may be using when picking colleges, while representativeness discusses suggestions on how information may be applied in the process.

Smith discusses that the availability heuristic "predicts that people will use the information that is most easily recalled or readily 'available' to them as the basis of judgment (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973)" (Smith, 1988, p. 16). Although it may not be fully known what information students use in this basis of judgement, it is known that direct experiences or examples are easier called to the forefront of memory. This could potentially mean that if a student or someone that the student is close to has had a really great or really bad experience with an institution, this could affect their search characteristics as they are still following external formulas.

Representativeness, discussed in Smith's (1988) article, could help to describe what the student places their judgement on and what information is important or unimportant. Since this aspect of cognitive heuristics involves how information will be applied, this aids in the understanding of what information students apply to applications and how they do that. Stereotypes could include expectations about what a typical college student is like, in which a student could compare themselves to this student and make a value judgement on their ability to attend a certain institution. This comes into play when a student is looking at safety, match, or reach schools. Smith (1988) created Figure 1 to show the proposed process of college choice.



The College Decision Making Process

Career choice and college choice likely use the same processes within a student's development, as the two are not mutually exclusive and not all that different. Carlson (2001) discusses Parson's (1909) classic "true reasoning" paradigm, saying that this was truly the start of when researchers started to try to develop an understanding of how people go about the career decision making process. In order to examine this, research was done on past decisions — specifically, asking high school seniors about their college choice decision making process and choosing which schools to apply to.

While studying rational decision-making strategies, the studies revealed "two distinct continua entitled Actions of Others and Self-Directedness" (Carlson, 2001, p. 3). Actions of Others is describing how other people affect the decision-making process by providing support, information, or guidance. The Self-Directedness continua is about how the person deciding relies on others during the decision-making process. Additionally, Carlson discusses that "it was suggested by some (e.g., Harren, 1979; Tiedeman & O 'Hara, 1963) that a good decision is reached as a function of progressing through various stages of exploration, identification of alternatives, choice and implementation of that choice" (Carlson, 2001, p. 6). While this is generally based on career choice, it can be applied to college choice as well, especially since the authors focused on that to examine how career choices are made.

The Common Application

The Common Application was launched in 1975 and has changed the way that college admission works. The Common Application affects admissions and yield rate and generally reduces the opportunity cost of students applying to college. It is relatively easy for a student to send applications to multiple institutions, as it does not always increase the cost and amount of work that a student is doing. Despite some colleges requiring supplemental questions with the application, there is still a gain in number of applications.

Although institutions that are members of the common application had a small decrease in mean SAT scores, there was a large increase of applications from students of color. Not only has the number of applicants increased, but the number of students that enroll in the college is increased as well. Some institutions take advantage of this increase in applications, as it can create a lower acceptance rate — boosting the prestige of the school.

It was found that Common Application membership increased applications by 5.7% (Yung-Hsu Liu et al., 2007). Additionally, it was shown that "that institutional membership expands the applicant pool but draws in some applicants who are less likely to enroll if admitted" (Yung-Hsu Liu et al., 2007, p. 14-15). Interestingly enough, the authors showed that "membership increases applications more at lower SAT institutions, perhaps because applicants apply to more 'safety' schools once the cost of doing so decreases" (Yung-Hsu Liu et al., 2007, p. 16), continuing on to say that these institutions have had issues attracting students in the past.

This may mean that students who are now applying to these institutions using the common application found the school to be unreachable in the past or not worth applying to for other reasons, suggesting that the common application has mitigated these issues by lessening the opportunity cost. A counselor quoted in The Washington Post claimed that the "common app reduces the stress students feel because there is less paperwork. '. . . it's given [the students] more of a comfort zone and . . . they haven't had to think as much about time management . . .'" (Gordon, 2010). This could also mean that students who are more risk-averse may have fears alleviated by creating an easier way to apply to college.

Baxter Magolda's (2001) Self-Authorship Theory

Baxter Magolda (2001) created a theory called The Path to Self-Authorship. In this, she defines and identifies four stages that young adults go through while starting to find themselves. The first phase is entitled Finding Formulas. Baxter Magolda defines this as when young adults are simply following external formulas that certain authorities have laid out for them — this includes careers and personal lives (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In this phase, young adults do not have a clear sense of self defined and rely on others to define a formula for them.

The second phase, Crossroads, is where people start to see that the need for defining themselves and that the formulas created by others may not be their own ideas (Baxter Magolda, 2001). They start seeing the need to figure out who they are. The third phase is called Becoming the Author of One's Life. In this phase, individuals start to choose their own beliefs and values and stand up for these beliefs in the face of a conflicting external viewpoint (Baxter Magolda, 2001). The final phase, Internal Foundation, individuals are grounded in their own values and belief system (Baxter Magolda, 2001). They have found and are comfortable with their sense of self.

Marica's (1966, 1980) Ego Identity Statuses

James Marcia created a theory dealing with the identity development of young adults. He creates four identity states, called Foreclosure, Moratorium, Identity Achievement, and Diffusion.

Foreclosure is where individuals are in a no crisis state with commitment. This is generally where an individual accepts the values given to them by authorities and have little crisis because of this. Individuals can remain in this status if they are never encouraged to challenge the status quo and if these authoritative figures in their lives remain consistent. Marcia (1994) explains that this is the most common identity status and typically happens before other statuses (Marcia, 1966).

Moratorium is when individuals are in crisis with no commitment. They are in the process of challenging their identity while exploring new possibilities of themselves. Marcia describes this status the most engaging status as individuals are starting to challenge their prescribed values but are not committed to forming a new identity (Marcia, 1966).

Identity achievement is when individuals are in a state of crisis with commitment. While an individual here is open to new opportunities and possibilities, they have made a commitment to their identity that was previously challenged. This comes after the individual has experienced a period of crisis and have commitments with an identity formation that they have recently explored. Individuals are in crisis because they are stable enough with their commitment to be able to challenge other options. Marcia (1980, 1994) describes this as the healthiest psychological status (Marcia, 1966).

Identity diffusion is when individuals are not in a state of crisis and do not have any commitment. They are almost in a state of limbo, with no commitment to identity and no exploration. These individuals basically go with the flow and are generally uninterested in the exploration of their life preferences.

Limitations and Gaps in Research

There is currently little research on the developmental process that students go through when they apply to college. Additionally, there is little research on exactly how a student determines their selection criteria. This leaves us to assume that students are likely following external formulas and relying on their cognitive heuristic search to determine which colleges to apply to. Furthermore, there is little research on what happens when a student does not get admitted to any college that they applied to.

Another gap in literature is the effect of the Coalition Application on the admissions process, as the Coalition Application was recently introduced in 2015. Although this might have similar effects as the Common Application, this lessens the monetary cost aspect of college applications as the Coalition Application is free of any cost. Overall, there is a lot more research to do in order to create a thorough model of student development during the application process.

Model of Student Development Through College Applications

In order to combine these two models and two theories, it is necessary to look at how the current theories fit together. Although Jackson's (1981) and Hossler's (1985) models vary, they have similarities that are important to combine. Additionally, the Common Application alters the way students applied to college previously in that it changes the cognitive heuristics. The search parameters are widened in that there is one place where students are able to apply to numerous institutions with lessened opportunity cost. These aspects are important to discuss in a theory that measures how a student goes about the process of applying to college. Baxter Magolda's (2001) and Marcia's (1966, 1980) theories will be also combined with the models mentioned previously to create this new theory.

When looking at current literature and existing theories, it is possible to combine them to reflect the effects of the common application and risk-taking theories. A new theory should be created, existing in four phases — Exploration of Preferences, Exclusion of Options, Evaluation and Implementation, and Enrollment Choice.

The Four Phases

Using phases in this model aligns with Jackson (1981) and Hossler's (1985) models and is representative of how a student moves through the application process, going from one phase to another. It is unlikely that the student will move back and forth between the phases, as they are generally in a sequential order. Additionally, there is a certain timeline that needs to be implemented as there are certain deadlines for applications that students must meet. This causes the student to move through the phases in addition to their cognitive development that is already happening.

Exploration of Preferences

This phase is similar to the preference phase in Jackson's (1982) model and Hossler's (1985) phase of predisposition. Although Jackson and Hossler define this phase as developing certain aspects of a student's life that creates opportunities or preferences for attending certain colleges, this can be expanded. As discussed in Smith's article, the availability heuristic predicts that people use the information that is at the forefront of their mind and is most easily accessed. This may come from the perspectives of students' that attended college or the specific colleges they are looking at. Because experiences are likely at the top of a student's mind when thinking about college, this is extremely relevant in this stage. Student's perceptions of college and of a specific institution will affect which schools they ultimately decide to apply to and attend.

This phase would also incorporate Baxter Magolda's (2001) first phase of self-authorship, Finding Formulas. Baxter Magolda defines this as when individuals are following external formulas that have been laid out for them — here, we can interpret this to be a parent or other authority figure setting up an external formula for the individual to seek higher education. This can affect what kinds of schools the individual selects to apply to and what kind of experience they are seeking, based on others' external formulas laid out for their ideal kind of college experience.

Exclusion of Options

This phase is similar to Jackson's (1982) exclusion phase and Hossler's (1985) search phase. Here, a student creates their choice set by comparing college characteristics to their own values. Additionally, the student's preferences created in the previous model would be weighed to match what kind of identity they are starting to create in this phase. This would also incorporate Baxter Magolda's (2001) Crossroads phase. The student would start to see that they need to define their own preferences and figure out what options are best for them — not what others have prescribed for them previously. In Marcia's (1966, 1980) theory, this would be considered identity moratorium. These students are able to start weighing options because they have moved into this state.

Evaluation and Implementation

In Jackson (1982) and Hossler's (1985) models, this is when students develop rankings in the college list and when they start aligning their morals. Here is where Actions of Others, Self-Directedness, and representativeness come into play. Actions of O PAVE, or Peer Advisors for Veteran Education thers affects how a student may rank, as other people provide their input and thus may influence the student. Similarly, Self-Directedness can come into play but gives the student more control over what aspects of the decision-making process others have an effect on. Finally, the representativeness heuristic helps the student decide what aspects and expectations are important to them, such as what a student looks like in a certain institution. As students start to choose their own values systems, they start to decide what aspects of a college they are looking for. They are no longer relying on the external formulas as they were in

stage one — they now have their own formulas to rely on. Identity moratorium still continues to exist, as these students are still in crisis with no commitment.

Final Choice

The final stage of the model, where students end up making a final value judgement, consider the options, and decide which institution to attend. Even though this phase involves a student committing to an institution, there are still several choices being made. The student must decide what they will major in, and this will likely continue to be a theme throughout their college career. This phase also affects students that were not admitted to any universities they applied to or for whatever reason decided not to attend a higher education institution.

Using Marcia's (1966, 1980) ego identity status theory, it can be assumed that the student is in the identity achievement status. They are in crisis in that they are likely open to options of their values and beliefs, however, they have committed to an institution and system of beliefs. The crisis also involves the uncertainty that remains in the college enrollment process, even though the institution is confirmed.

Recommendations for Practitioners

It is clear that students are more likely to apply to schools that could be considered "reach" schools if there is little opportunity cost. Evidence suggests that students are more likely to check the box for a reach school if it requires little to no extra work and/or has no application fee. The common application has shown that this is the case and has also shown that it created a more diverse pool of applicants and accepted students, though does not discuss the yield — meaning the number of students who are accepted that end up enrolling in the institution. Additionally, since there is more detail on the developmental phases a student is going through when applying to college, new systems of support can be created for these students. Ultimately, it is the practitioners' job to expand access and diversity within institutions, and it seems like creating equal access and lessening opportunity cost and mitigating causes of students having a risk-averse mindset is where we should begin.

Additionally, admissions counselors and other professionals can help the parents support their students using this framework, as the developmental process is recognized and is thus acknowledgeable. Part of this is having the parent recognize that their student is following external formulas likely provided by the parent, and then discussing how the parent can create an environment where their students are able to create their own individual thoughts. It must also be realized that students need, to some extent, these external formulas to create their own formulas — we cannot just eliminate them.

Conclusion

Since there is no current literature discussing the development that a student goes through while applying to college, it makes sense to create a new theory that compiles previous literature to create a succinct idea of student development. This theory can change the way that practitioners and admissions officers approach students entering the college application process. The theory will need adjustments as there continues to be updates in the way college admissions operates and when more research is provided, such as the implications of the coalition application or other application systems. It is also important to remember, in general, that a student can decide at any time that they do not want to attend college and fall into the "Final Choice" phase, where they will require different systems of support. Overall, the application process is fluid, but there are key aspects that demonstrate a student has moved from one phase to another.

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