[Georgia Tech Admission Blog](http://pwp.gatech.edu/admission-blog)

[**Ad(mission): It’s not fair.**](https://pwp.gatech.edu/admission-blog/2017/05/16/admission-its-not-fair/)

May 16, 2017 by [Richard Clark](https://pwp.gatech.edu/admission-blog/author/rc218/)

I suppose I could have gone with “An Admission: It’s not fair!” What can I say, catchy titles are not my thing. Working on it. But at this time of year, “fairness” is a resounding theme.

“How can you waitlist my son? He has 30 points higher and two more APs than your average. And we know someone down the street who got in that….”

“Something is wrong with your process if my daughter who has been through as many medical issues as she has and still has a 3.8 is not getting in. Talk about not being fair….”

“And don’t get me started on financial aid… or lack thereof.”

These are actual quotes from real people. Granted, they’re being used without acknowledgment (I didn’t think asking for permission to use them would be part of the healing process). Undeniably, there is something hardwired in us that longs for right, equal, just, fair, and perfect results. And these are noble aspirations.

 

Kids are among the most vocal about longing for fairness. Spend the same amount of money on presents? “Well, he got more gifts.” Buy the exact same number of gifts? “That one of hers is bigger!” “Okay, tell you what, I’m going to take all of these out to the fire pit then and you can play with this cardboard box.” Now they’re both screaming in unison, writhing on the ground and flailing, with great gnashing of teeth. It’s like a scene from Revelation followed by a simultaneous and guttural reaction: “That’s not fair!”

Well, my friends, neither is college admission. If you applied to a college that has a selective (meaning below 33% admit rate) process, or if you are a counselor, principal, parent, friend of someone who has gone through this lately, you know this to be true. Inevitably, you know someone who was denied or waitlisted that was “better” or “more qualified” or “should have gotten in.”

I try not to specifically speak for my colleagues, but I feel confident saying this for anyone that works at a highly selective college that has just denied a ton of the students you are thinking about/calling about/inquiring about: *We know. It’s NOT fair. You’re not crazy.* In fact, we’d be the first to concur that there are many denied students with higher SAT/ACT scores or more community service or more APs or who wrote a better essay or participated in more clubs and sports than some who were admitted.  But here is what is critical for you to understand– **ultimately, the admission process for schools denying twice or three times or sometimes ten times more students than they admit– is not about fairness. It’s about mission.**

**Mission Drives Admission.**

Selective colleges publish mid-50% ranges or averages on our freshman profiles to serve as guides, not guarantees. These are the quantifiable factors that provide an overall sense of the admitted or enrolling class. Yes, we look at test scores, rigor of curriculum, course performance, impact on a community, essays, interviews, and so on. But what drives a holistic review process and serves as a guide for admitting students is a school’s mission. Counselors in high schools talk a great deal about “fit.” Where are you going to thrive? Where are you going to create a network or be challenged?

Where do you see students that will push and challenge and stretch you to grow as a person and as a learner? These questions come from the fact that they’re savvy and educated not just about our admission processes and stats, but more importantly about our distinct missions. Ultimately, choosing the right school should not just be about “can I get in?” from a statistical or quantifiable standpoint, but “do I align with their mission?” It takes more work to figure that out, but that’s your job as an applicant or prospective student.

If you look at the academic profiles of [Caltech](http://www.admissions.caltech.edu/content/class-profile)and [Amherst,](https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/669797) they are very similar. But take a look at their missions.

[Amherst](https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/facts/mission)(*abbreviated*) “Amherst College educates men and women of exceptional potential from all backgrounds so that they may seek, value, and advance knowledge, engage the world around them, and lead principled lives of consequence… and is committed to learning through close colloquy and to expanding the realm of knowledge through scholarly research and artistic creation at the highest level. Its graduates link learning with leadership—in service to the College, to their communities, and to the world beyond.”

[Caltech](http://www.caltech.edu/content/mission-statement) “…to expand human knowledge and benefit society through research integrated with education. We investigate the most challenging, fundamental problems in science and technology in a singularly collegial, interdisciplinary atmosphere, while educating outstanding students to become creative members of society.”

The difference in missions is why an individual student sometimes gets in to a higher ranked or more selective school and is denied at another. The student applying to Amherst has the same profile, involvement, writing ability, scores, and grades. but is a totally different fit in their process than for Caltech. This is, at least in part, what counselors are talking about when they say “fit.” It’s fit with mission. You’ll hear schools talk about “institutional priorities.” These are simply components of the macro vision and mission of a university.

**A quick look at Georgia Tech**

Founded: 1885. Classes begin 1888. One major- Mechanical Engineering. All male. It was a trade school responding to the needs of 19th century and early 20th century Georgia and US South.  The focus was on training and preparation for product creation and being prepared to lead and create the next in an industrializing state, region, and nation. Were there more “qualified” or “smarter” students at the time who had aspirations of becoming ministers or lawyers or physicians? Unquestionably. And had they applied with those intentions, they likely would not have been admitted. It was not our mission to educate students for those roles.

1912: Tech establishes a “School of Commerce” which is essentially a business program. 1952: Tech begins enrolling women. 1961: Georgia Tech becomes the first school in the South to integrate classes without a court order. It’s not hard for me to envision a younger brother in 1954 who is by all counts smarter than his older brother not being admitted to Tech due to this change in mission. Supply and demand drive admit rates. If your supply shrinks due to a shift in your mission, then admission decisions also change based upon factors besides grades, scores, or performance.

The University of North Carolina system is mandated by their legislature to enroll no more than 18% of students from outside of the state. This is why the admit rate for Chapel Hill is [more than three times higher for in-state students vs. non-residents.](http://admissions.unc.edu/apply/class-profile-2/) There are valedictorians from around the country not admitted to UNC who get into Ivy League schools. Does this sound controversial or unfair? Not if you understand that *mission drives admission.*Schools end academic programs. They add majors. They create new co-curricular programs or add or terminate sports teams. Mission changes and with it admission decisions are impacted to support those goals.

At Tech, our mission is “to define the technological university of the 21st century.” Our motto is “Progress and Service.” Our commitment is to “improve the human condition.” So while we are going to provide stats and averages and profiles like all other schools, these are the conversations in admission committee that contribute to decisions. Fair? No. Perfect? No. Reality? Yes.

**What does this mean for you?**

If you are a senior (or a parent of a senior) who has been denied or waitlisted: You are most likely just as smart, capable, and talented as other students admitted to that school. Move past the numbers and the comparison. You’re absolutely right: it’s not fair in a comparative sense. But that school has made its decisions in light of advancing their mission. Inevitably, you’ve also been admitted to a school where, if you looked hard enough, you could find someone denied with higher scores or more APs or better grades than you. But **you** fit their mission. Embrace that!

If you are an underclassmen (or parent of one): Selective schools will say, “We are looking to shape a class.” Counselors will talk to you about “fit.” As you try to digest and comprehend what that really means- or where that comes from- look to the school’s mission. Use the academic ranges they provide as a guide. Check out the profiles and other historical data to see how “students like you” have done in the past. But keep in mind those graphs don’t show the qualitative elements. When you are writing or interviewing at schools, do your homework in advance by researching. The essay you write for Caltech should not be the same one you write for Amherst. Your mission, should you choose to accept it (see what I did there?), is to find a school that aligns your academic ability with your vision of the future. Data is helpful. Stats are important. But fit, ethos, campus community, and your ability to be honest with who you are and want to be– that’s the best way to approach the process.

 

The other day my son was inconsolable. “She got presents on my birthday, and I never get anything on hers. It’s just not fair!” Finally, I just grabbed him, held him, and kept saying, “I know, son. I know.” So listen, you may not feel any better after reading this blog. Still angry. Still frustrated. I get it. I just wanted to save you that part of any email you send schools or the first part of a phone call. You can go right into other grievances and skip the “it’s not fair” part. We know, we know.