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EDUCATION LIFE

A New Coalition of Elite Colleges Tries to Reshape Admissions

By **LAURA PAPPANO** OCT. 26, 2015

Perhaps the college application process should be preceded by a trigger warning. For students, it's the season of stress. Admissions deans aren't so fond of it, either. They complain of a system that is rushed, less revealing than they would like and "very transactional," as Jeremiah Quinlan, dean of undergraduate admissions at Yale, puts it. At both ends of the admissions game — picking a freshman class or applying for a spot in one — the experience is vexing.

The Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success, a new organization led by admissions deans at top campuses, has announced an ambitious goal: to make applications more reflective and in tune with how students organize and express themselves. In April, it will offer free online planning tools and in July a new application, for the class of 2021.

With the Common Application now used by more than 625 schools, the coalition is marketing itself as a high-integrity brand. Coalition members must have a six-year graduation rate of at least 70 percent and meet students' full financial need or, if public, offer "affordable" in-state tuition (as yet undefined). So far, more than 80 of about 140 eligible colleges and universities have signed on, including all the Ivys, liberal arts elites like Amherst and Bowdoin and publics like Texas A&M and Miami University of Ohio.

The coalition wants students as young as ninth grade to engage with its college planner. They will be able to upload videos, photos and written work to a portfolio,

called a virtual college locker. Selected items from the portfolio could be added — in some cases years later — to a college application. They can also invite counselors, parents and even admissions officers to view the portfolio and advise on it. (Yes, it works on your phone.)

The organizers believe that access to their schools will be enhanced, in part by getting information sooner to low-income and first-generation students, thus giving them a better shot. Many discover too late the classes, tests and activities needed for a top college, said James G. Nondorf, coalition president and dean of admissions and financial aid at the University of Chicago. “Deciding you want to go to one of our kinds of schools, you have to be doing things all through your high school years.”

That said, the backlash to the coalition’s plans has been vocal. Critics have been quick to dissect the membership list, noting that a number of the private colleges are “need aware” — an applicant’s ability to pay can factor in admissions decisions — or they include loans in their financial aid packages. That can discourage access. Some high school counselors have complained that there are too many changes already in the 2016-17 admissions cycle, citing a revised SAT and an earlier start to applying for federal financial aid. Though the coalition had already pushed back the locker’s launch date in the wake of negative feedback, counselors are now asking for a full year’s delay.

And some criticism has gone to the very heart of the program: that drawing 14-year-olds into admissions tasks will make a stressful process more so. In an Oct. 13 letter to the coalition, 100 counselors from Jesuit high schools, many serving low-income and first-generation students, objected to pushing first-year students to think about college. They should be acclimating to high school, they wrote, and learning for learning’s sake.

“We believe ninth grade is a time for students to reflect and become their academic selves,” said Katy Murphy, director of College Counseling at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose, Calif., and a past president of the Jesuit High School College Counselors Association.

“To start putting together an electronic résumé puts a lot of pressure on kids and parents to consider what should go into that locker,” she said.

Mr. Nondorf argues the opposite, that an early start reduces pressure. “When they get to their junior year there isn’t this terror, ‘Oh, my God, it’s time to apply to college.’ They are looking at their portfolios: ‘I’m ready for this.’ ”

The hope is that with years to collect and curate one’s life, a more authentic applicant may emerge. “I can go down the components of an application and I am concerned about every single one of them as showing the true voice of an applicant,” said John F. Latting, vice provost for undergraduate enrollment and dean of admissions at Emory, a coalition member. “Literally,” he said, “every single one.”

Some colleges intend to begin a dialogue years before it’s time to apply. Barbara Gill, who oversees undergraduate admissions at the University of Maryland and is vice president of the coalition, is readying her staff to advise students via the online platform starting in eighth grade, one on one — “not to replace the role of the counselor in the high school but to augment it,” she said. (And, of course, to build brand loyalty to the Terrapins.)

Dean Paul Thiboutot at Carleton College, a coalition member, envisions chat rooms with his admissions officers or shopping-style prompts: “Could we send a reminder to someone that we responded to as a ninth grader who we didn’t hear from? ‘Remember, at one time you had Carleton in your cart?’ ”

Much is yet to be figured out. With schools able to have customized pages, will students have to answer even more questions than they do now on myriad supplements? If the complaint about the Common Application is its lack of nuanced questions, what will these ask? Not clear.

The coalition was born of frustration following widespread website crashes and glitches with the Common Application two years ago as early-decision deadlines approached.

That month, with many admissions directors gathered in New York for a meeting at the College Board, Dr. Latting invited 15 to dinner. Seated at a long table in a theater district restaurant, they decided they “had to take more control,” he said.

Like the coalition, the Common Application comprises member institutions. But

it is run by a professional staff whose rules spurred longstanding beefs with colleges. Questions on a college's supplement had to be approved, and were rejected if deemed too similar to the main form. If the Common App was not the school's exclusive application, it was pricier. Some objected to a policy change, to go into effect this admissions season, that members no longer have to evaluate candidates holistically, an approach that looks beyond grade-point averages and test scores.

After the meeting in New York, Dr. Latting drafted a letter spelling out complaints, and 23 enrollment and admissions directors signed. Last spring, an expanded group formed a nonprofit organization and began to develop an application that has evolved from a hedge against tech failures to a tool for reshaping the admissions process.

But the Common Application board has not been sitting still. Six months after the technical troubles, it replaced its embattled chief executive with Paul B. Mott, a one-time assistant admissions director at Williams College. Mr. Mott has been more accommodating to member colleges, immediately approving more than 100 custom questions that had been denied or put on the back burner (approval is no longer required for supplement questions).

The organization also revised its mission statement to have a sharper focus on equity and access, and in August unveiled new college search and planning tools, plus a partnership with the Dell Foundation to help students find scholarships. It is piloting a tool to remind those eligible for financial aid to fill out the forms.

A response to the coalition effort? "No, it's not," Mr. Mott insisted. A 2014 member survey, he said, had revealed that colleges wanted help "bringing in diversity and identifying talent." Last year, the Common Application processed 3.7 million applications from 860,000 students; 32 percent identified as first generation.

Coalition members that now use the Common Application will still accept it. And how much the coalition tools will reshape the process depends on how members reshape themselves. "Why is Yale asking for the same inputs that Yale was asking for 30 years ago?" Mr. Quinlan asked. He worries "about how hard it is becoming to differentiate students in my applicant pool."

Would Yale replace its second 500-word personal statement with something from a digital portfolio? It could, he says.

Dr. Latting imagines Emory accepting recommendation letters from community groups in lieu of high school counselors.

Mr. Nondorf expects next year's applicants to the University of Chicago to include "video, art, something they created in high school of which they are particularly proud" that "conveys what makes them tick and who they are."

Last spring, one of the strongest students at Lincoln Park High School in Chicago was wait-listed at the University of Chicago. A gifted musician, her International Baccalaureate recital "was one of the best ones we've ever had," said Michael Boraz, the principal. Her writing, though, lacked sparkle — or coaching. Mr. Boraz called the university to advocate for her and she was admitted. He now wonders if her application would have been seen differently if she had been able to replace an essay with her recital video.

Low-income and first-generation students are both helped and hurt by technology. Kevin Murchie, who teaches Advanced Placement English at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, said students desperately need more information — and sooner — about college. He is keen on a planning tool starting freshman year of high school. But Wi-Fi is spotty in his classroom, he said. Essay writing is tough because many students lack home computers. Students who do have one use pirated word processing software rife with bugs. And they use their phones. So Mr. Murchie requires assignments to be turned in on paper. How to upload an essay to an online portfolio? The library has a scanner, but demand for it is high.

Ms. Murphy, the Jesuit counselor, said that rolling out so quickly would be hard on schools with few resources. "How are they supposed to manage this?" she asked. And how will underserved students navigate a portfolio?

In a diplomatically worded letter sent last month to the coalition, the Association of College Counselors of Independent Schools also complained of feeling rushed. Emmi Harward, its executive director, said schools and families need more time to understand the platform, and to be sure there are no glitches. "It is riskier to

say nothing and have this go wrong,” she said.

At one of the nation’s top public high schools, word of a new application is being received with resignation. James P. Conroy, chairman of post-high school counseling at New Trier Township High School in Winnetka, Ill., has eight full-time college counselors for a senior class of about 1,000. Offered the chance to pilot the coalition platform this fall, Mr. Conroy declined. He fears the early start will intensify the college competition.

“We don’t need any more pressure in this community,” he said. Parents of eighth graders already want to meet with the college counselors. “We say that is way too early.” Will alternatives to the traditional essay reveal more about applicants? “Why does this make it any less packaged?” he asked. “They have essay help; now they will have video help.”

But Mr. Conroy knows the new coalition platform can’t be ignored. “It’s not the university of nowhere. These are the gold-plated schools. It’s a question mark of how it’s going to go. It could go very smoothly — or it could be, ‘Why aren’t you having classes now to do this?’ ” he said. “We will try to walk that fine line, which here is not walked very well, between information and hysteria.”

Correction: October 31, 2015

An article on Page 14 this weekend about a new admissions process from a coalition of elite colleges refers incorrectly to James G. Nondorf of the University of Chicago. He is the dean of admissions and financial aid, but he does not have a Ph.D.; therefore he is not “Dr. Nondorf.”

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