

Riding the Coattails of Hooked Applicants: A Hidden Way of Getting In?

Extended Abstract

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Introduction

Admissions officers at elite colleges and universities work behind closed doors. Applicants generally do not know which factors lead to the outcome of their application, nor do they know who else applied. It is not surprising that admissions officers prefer some secrecy, given that not everyone agrees on what constitutes merit for attending a selective institution. Academic qualities—e.g. strong SAT scores, good high school grades, rigorous high school coursework—are widely accepted as a basis for admission; non-academic characteristics—e.g. talent in a sport or extracurricular activity, membership in an underrepresented minority group, potential for financial donations—are more contentious.

There is a situation in which some of the secrecy of admissions decisions is lost. When one or more students from the same high school apply to the same university, these applicants can compare their application outcomes amongst each other. This process may shed light on a university's approach to applicants with favorable non-academic characteristics. For example, if the university admits an academically lower-ranked student who is a football player, but does not admit a higher-ranked student who is not, it exposes its preferential treatment of athletes. To avoid controversy in such cases, there is a strategy an admissions office could turn to.

Theoretical Framework

A way to avoid exposing preferential admission of candidates with favorable non-academic characteristics is for universities to admit academically higher-ranked candidates from the same high school alongside. The process where one candidate gains admission by riding the coattails—or using the tie to—a preferred applicant has been called “coattails” admissions (Toor 2001). In an account of the selection process at an elite university, a former admissions officer describes a case where the admissions office admitted a high school valedictorian in order to admit a Latino first-generation college applicant, because “when there’s a student whom we want to take – for whatever reason, either because they will add diversity to the class or because there is an institutional interest in their application – we feel compelled to admit a “better” student so that school will “understand” the decision” (Toor 2001).

While journalistic accounts have provided examples of coattailing, no study to date has quantitatively examined the phenomenon. Quantitative studies of factors that influence who is admitted to academically selective colleges and universities have focused on individual candidates' qualifications. The odds of admission have been found to be higher for strong academic achievers, recruited athletes, underrepresented minority students, and applicants with solid extracurricular background, all else equal (Espenshade and Radford 2009).

One major assumption underlying prior studies has been that the admissions probability of a student is dependent only on this student's application; they did not take into account the context in which an applicant applies. The current study addresses this shortcoming. Using data from the National Study of College Experience (NSCE), we examine the extent to which top-ranked applicants ride the coattails of lower-ranked applicants to get in to the university of their choice.

Data

The NSCE collected data on applications for the entering cohorts of 1983, 1993, and 1997 from ten colleges and universities. The institutions include public and private research universities in addition to liberal arts colleges. They have geographic spread, covering all four regions of the country. The institutions are all academically selective. As Espenshade and Radford (2009) have shown by comparing characteristics of the NSCE institutions with characteristics of the top 50 universities in the U.S. News & World Report ranking, the NSCE institutions are representative of these top 50. The data includes information on the set of all applicants to a given institution for a particular year, including the applicants' individual characteristics, the high schools they attended, and the outcomes of their applications.

Method

To set up the data for analysis, we first create sets of two applicants or more that apply from the same high school to the same college during the same admissions period in the same year. We rank the applicants in each of these sets according to their Academic Index—a measure calculated by Ivy League schools to summarize academic performance—and identify the highest-ranked applicant. To this observation we attach information on the lower-ranked applicants. For example, in a set of two candidates, the following indicators are added to the observation of the top-ranked: (i) whether or not number two is accepted; (ii) whether or not number two is an underrepresented minority student; (iii) whether or not number two is a legacy; (iv) whether or not number two is an athlete; (v) whether or not number two has exceptional talent in an extracurricular activity.

We then run logistic regression analysis on the top-ranked candidates to predict admission to the institution in question. Admission is estimated as a function of candidates' individual and high school characteristics, and—most importantly for the current analysis—characteristics of the lower-ranked candidates applying from the same high school. This design will allow us to answer the following questions: (i) Does the acceptance of a lower-ranked candidate boost the admissions chances of the top-ranked candidate, all else equal?; (ii) If so, does the size of the boost depend on how far apart the two candidates are in terms of academic strength?; (iii) Does the size of the boost differ for lower-ranked candidates with different (measurable) characteristics?

Preliminary Results and Conclusions

Initial findings for the first and second research questions point to affirmative answers. Among sets where two applicants apply from a given high school to a given university, a logistic regression equation predicting whether or not the top-ranked applicant is admitted produces a positive and significant coefficient for the variable indicating that the lower-ranked candidate was admitted. A term that interacts whether or not the lower-ranked candidate was admitted with the distance in academic strength between the two candidates is also positive and significant.

Affirmative answers to the questions in this study would provide first evidence for some form of coattails practice in the admissions offices of selective universities. This would mean that admissions officers perceive non-academic bases for admission to be less commonly accepted than academic ones; when admitting an academically lower-ranked student from a particular high school, they cover up by also admitting the top-ranked candidate. These findings would also reveal an unintended consequence of preferential treatment of certain applicant groups: a boost in admissions for regular applicants.

References

Espenshade, Thomas J. and Radford, Alexandria W. 2009. *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life*. Princeton University Press.

Toor, Rachel. 2001. *Admissions Confidential: An Insider's Account of the Elite College Selection Process*. New York: St. Martin's Press.