Students boxed in by new college application limits

By Christopher Hamilton

Once upon a time, would-be college students filled out paper applications. Today, more than 450 American colleges and universities utilize The Common Application, encouraging more than 750,000 students to conveniently apply to dozens of institutions with a single online form. Although some institutions buck the trend, including MIT and the University of California, most find it a boon – the convenience of The Common Application generally drives up the number of applicants, thereby increasing "selectivity," a vital statistic in the U.S. News rankings. Even institutions like Harvard, which rejects many valedictorians every year, are under pressure to increase the number of applicants. But how can any institution carefully examine 35,000 applications, roughly the number Harvard received last year?

This month at the National Association for College Counseling (NACAC) conference, Rob Killion, executive director of The Common Application, offered one solution: Set strict limits on what students can say. Killion announced that next year's Common Application would include fewer essays choices, no space for an additional resume, and a strictly enforced word limit of 500 words for the personal essay. In one sense, this is an obvious solution to the bittersweet problem of too many applications. Shorter essays take less time to read; if the average essay length shrinks from 1,000 or 800 words to 500 words, institutions could save thousands of labor hours.

Unlike most nations, such as China and Korea, or France and England, where standardized exams do most of the sorting, selective American universities employ "holistic" admission. We don't admit students purely through numbers like grades and SAT scores. We want to know, among other things, "Does this student contribute to his or her community? Has this student overcome tremendous challenges?" In one NACAC session, the University of Chicago explained that it rejects "60 percent of the applicants with perfect SAT scores." To some, that's a bit shocking. To many of us, that statistic expresses the central virtue of "holistic" admissions: Our nation's pickiest institutions want to see the whole person – not just a score. That's why they put so much emphasis on counselor letters, teacher recommendations, and the essays. And that's why the proposed changes to the Common Application are problematic.

In the age of Twitter, 500 words may seem like plenty. Twain reportedly quipped, "If I'd had more time, I would have written a shorter letter." And my own experience

teaching UCLA undergrads suggests that most student essays are twice as good when half as long. But at 400-plus pages, Twain's autobiography is no tweet. It's hard to write about yourself.

Most admissions staffers, when pressed, admit that they spend somewhere between five and 15 minutes reading a student's application. That strikes me as something like the time most busy Americans spend eating breakfast, so I began reading cereal boxes with more care.

How many words are on the typical cereal box? I couldn't find a single one that could tell its story in under 500 words. Wheaties? 897 words. Lucky Charms? 781 words. Count Chocula can tell his tale in 688 words, but he's a rather taciturn fellow – it's the ingredients that require wordy explanations (Trisodium phosphate? I think I used that stuff painting houses in college). Honey Nut Cheerios takes 990 words to tell its story, but in all fairness the box explores complicated issues of cholesterol and whole grain goodness, as well as the puzzler, "What makes Honey Nut Cheerios so delicious?"

If the changes proposed by the Common Application take hold, colleges will gain considerable efficiencies in admissions. Although students are the users, it is the colleges who are the customers – they pay the fees for The Common Application. And a good business listens to its customers. But perhaps there's already too much of the business model in American universities and colleges – too much marketing of slick "viewbooks" and five-star dormitories. Colleges have endless resources to sell themselves to students. Perhaps students should be allowed just a little more space to share the message of who they are. The public University of California campuses encourage 1,000 words; why should so

many private institutions, with greater resources, select their students based on a mere 500 words? Yes, there are the so-called "supplement" essays required by some colleges – but many of those formulaic questions sound a lot like the promotional blurbs on cereal boxes – "What makes our campus so delicious to you?" When Count Chocula's story is too nuanced to fit within the framework of the proposed 500-word limit, something spooky is going on.