

Universities Seeking Out Students of Means

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Money is talking a bit louder in college admissions these days, according to a survey to be released Wednesday by Inside Higher Ed, an online publication for higher education professionals.

More than half of the admissions officers at public research universities, and more than a third at four-year colleges said that they had been working harder in the past year to recruit students who need no financial aid and can pay full price, according to the survey of 462 admissions directors and enrollment managers conducted in August and early September.

Similarly, 22 percent of the admissions officials at four-year institutions said the financial downturn had led them to pay more attention in their decision to applicants' ability to pay.

“As institutional pressures mount, between the decreased state funding, the pressure to raise a college's profile, and the pressure to admit certain students, we're seeing a fundamental change in the admissions process,” said David A. Hawkins, director of public policy and research at the National Association for College Admission Counseling. “Where many of the older admissions professionals came in through the institution and saw it as an ethically centered counseling role, there's now a different dynamic that places a lot more emphasis on marketing.”

In the [survey](#), 10 percent of the admissions directors at four-year colleges — and almost 20 percent at private liberal-arts schools — said that the full-pay students they were admitting, on average, had lower grades and test scores than other admitted applicants.

But they are not the only ones with an edge: the admissions officers said they admitted minority students, athletes, veterans, children of alumni, international students and, for the sake of gender balance, men, with lesser credentials, too.

At many colleges and universities, the survey found, whom you know does matter. More than a quarter of the admissions directors said they had felt pressure from senior-level administrators to admit certain applicants, and almost a quarter got pressure from trustees or development officers.

“If external parties are trying to influence admissions decisions, that's a concern that strikes at the legitimacy of the whole process,” Mr. Hawkins said. “We certainly have standards, but there needs to be awareness that when the economy starts to crumble, the standards may start to go out the window.”

Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy, a two-person nonprofit he founded in 2003 to improve college admissions, said the Inside Higher Ed findings were troubling.

“There’s always been elements of this behavior, but it seems to me that it’s growing,” Mr. Thacker said. “I don’t know whether to blame it on hard times or lack of courage and leadership.”

Mr. Thacker said his own research had found students becoming more cynical about higher education.

“Students say, ‘They’re cheating us, so we can cheat them,’” he said. “The cheat they see is that colleges are out for themselves, not for them as students. Our research, with 2,500 students, found that of all the sources of information students get about higher education, they thought the least trustworthy sources are the colleges and college reps themselves.”

While [community colleges](#) said their most important challenge in the near future was reduced state funding, all the other institutions named rising concerns from families about tuition and affordability.

Admissions directors at many public universities said in the survey that recruiting more out-of-state and international students, who pay higher tuition, was their top strategy. At community colleges and private institutions, admissions officers were more likely to say that providing aid for low- and middle- income students was their focus.

More than half the admissions officers from four-year institutions said that coaching by parents or college counselors was making it harder to really learn about applicants.