

Wednesday, January 27, 2016

Gil J. Villanueva, Board Chair
Paul Mott, CEO
The Common App

Dear Mr. Villanueva and Mr. Mott,

As a Common Application member and against the backdrop of the pointed national discourse on the disparate impacts of the criminal justice system and the high school disciplinary system, NYU wants to raise a pressing issue -- the presence of the criminal conviction and the school disciplinary checkboxes on the Common App:

Have you ever been found responsible for a disciplinary violation at any educational institution you have attended from the 9th grade (or the international equivalent) forward, whether related to academic misconduct or behavioral misconduct, that resulted in a disciplinary action?

Have you ever been adjudicated guilty or convicted of a misdemeanor, felony, or other crime?

When the Common App was asked to add these questions by member institutions for the 2006-2007 admissions year, it reflected a national debate about crime on campus and colleges taking appropriate responsibility to protect students—sometimes from other students. Since that time, the purpose, benefit, and impact of these queries have come into question, and there has been a dearth of rigorous, objective research on their effect and value.

With this in mind, NYU urges that the Common App organization promptly undertake or commission a study to review the value of the continued presence of the “checkboxes” on the Common App. We believe such a review and evaluation will have important implications for the entire higher education system.

Ensuring the safety of the campus community and the personal integrity of students are important goals for universities. On its face, the rationale for the presence of the questions seems obvious: to enable a university to make an admissions decision that takes account of all relevant information concerning an applicant’s history.

However, especially in the context of high rates of school discipline and incarceration among people of color, it seems vital to pose two questions about the checkboxes: do they, in fact, have any predictive value, and does their presence work against universities’ mission as engines of social mobility and diversity either by discouraging applicants or by resulting in unjustified denials of admissions on the grounds of safety or integrity?

The Center for Community Alternatives has produced a series of reports raising just those questions.

At NYU, “checking the box” has never been an automatic bar to admissions; every entering class contains students who have criminal convictions and those with school disciplinary infractions. And, in response to demands by the NYU advocacy group Incarceration to Education Coalition (IEC) to “drop the box” altogether, this year we took the step of revising our practices to do an initial reading of admissions files without awareness of whether the criminal conviction box has been checked, and take account of that information only after an initial decision has been made.

Nevertheless, this change in admissions practices does not get to the heart of the issue, which in any case is not limited to NYU. But we confront a challenge: a lack of clear, objective evidence. The time seems right – indeed, past -- for thorough review. There is reason for urgency: each year the matter remains unresolved could mean we are disadvantaging students who might otherwise go on to earn a degree (the acquisition of which is associated with low recidivism).

Aware, as we are, of the Common App’s historic purpose – to broaden access -- we believe it fitting to strongly urge the Common App to take the lead rapidly in organizing a well-designed, objective study involving several universities on the impact of the two checkbox questions: whether they discourage applicants, whether they provide schools with information of predictive value, and whether their effects align with member schools’ principles and admissions objectives. Ultimately, our expectation is that the study’s findings will provide the basis for a thoughtful review by the Common App’s Board of Directors.

We would like to propose that 1) we get together with you in February to discuss how to move forward with the study, 2) we issue an RFP and select a principal investigator as early as possible in the spring semester, and 3) that we look to have some preliminary findings before the next admissions cycle (perhaps an initial review of data colleges already possess about who checked the checkboxes and their disciplinary and criminal outcomes) as part of wider review of the data.

Research universities believe in evidence-based decision-making; this matter merits study, and such an undertaking is entirely in line with our nature as institutions of higher inquiry. For its part, NYU would be happy to participate, to share our data, to work with the Common App to persuade other institutions to be part of the study, and to push this research effort forward so that we might promptly address issues of access and fairness.

We look forward to further discussion soon.

Sincerely,

MJ Knoll-Finn
NYU Vice President for Enrollment Management

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