

■ Beyond the Numbers: Answering the Question of Student Acceptance Rates to Professional School

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Abstract:

Pre-health advisors are asked with increasing frequency what the student acceptance rates are at their institutions. Prospective students and families use this number as a tool in discerning which undergraduate school to attend. This particular question poses a conundrum for advisors as the percentage is often not a clear representation of their value as an advising service and does not truly account for all factors that play into whether or not a student is accepted to professional school. There are many ways to address this question, but deciding on the best approach requires a delicate balance. By asking the question, a teaching moment with prospective students is presented.

“What is the percentage rate of your students accepted into professional programs?”

It seems this question is more prevalent than ever before. Prospective students are often prompted by high school counselors, family, friends, professionals in health care they know, and others in their life they trust to ask this; the conventional wisdom is that it is a key criterion they can use to compare undergraduate schools. For many people, this number seems to quickly and conveniently identify the value a school has to the student. Yet most of us in the health professions advising field realize it is not quite that simple. Behind the inquiry there may be some well-intentioned but misguided insights and perhaps a lack of understanding about what is truly important in selecting a college to attend. In responding appropriately, directly, and ethically, an advisor must navigate through some bumpy terrain in an effort to be respectful of the prospective student, other institutions, and their colleagues. Like most challenges in life, an excellent teaching moment lies within this experience.

After thinking about this topic for awhile, I realized that other advisors were dealing with the same issue. In the March 2010 issue of *The Advisor*, the “NAAHP, Inc. Focus Group Report” noted “being defined by acceptance rates” is considered one of the critical issues advisors face (Provost & Burkert, 2010). Although various constituents may define our offices this way, often there is insufficient time and means to explain the rates to prospective students, and the question tends to come up most frequently with this group. Clearly a significant number of us are concerned with how to address this, but what can be done? It certainly would be easier if there were a standard response we could collectively utilize, but realistically, a “one size fits all” answer may not suffice. Providing the percentage explicitly is even a challenge as there are no set guidelines for how to compute it. For example, in medicine, are you thinking about allopathic, osteopathic, Caribbean, and/or international programs? Do we even know every student who has

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applied? How many years do we cover—the last 5, 10, 15, 20? Should we include all the students who apply even if they do not have the appropriate credentials? Do we count all the times one particular student applies or just the time they are accepted? What about alumni who come back to apply or returning students just taking prerequisites with us — do we add them in as well? There are so many facets to consider when calculating this percentage to even begin answering this way requires a brief monologue about how it was determined. Even athletic coaches and admissions counselors probe pre-health advisors for this “all-telling” number because they too are pressed for details by students and families who are trying to be informed consumers. However, having a limited scope with these percentages can lead a student to be blindsided by misuse of this information. Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner provide a great example that helps delineate the problem at hand in their book *SuperFreakonomics: Global Warming, Patriotic Prostitutes and Why Suicide Bombers Should Buy Life Insurance*. They discuss how boiling down information to a number or combination of statistics can provide a helpful baseline for reference, but people must be cautious about misinterpreting what these figures mean. Levitt and Dubner provide a humorous example: if you take into account all the men and women in the world, based on averages, each adult should have one breast and one testicle (Levitt & Dubner, 2009). This certainly does not hold true for most people, but it does give some perspective (biologically at that) on how numbers alone can be misleading. With regard to a school’s acceptance rate, students would need to understand how the percentage is computed at each institution so an actual comparison can be made — should that be the ultimate goal.

With the technological advances society has achieved, immediate gratification and convenience are growing into expectations for many people, even in education. It brings to mind Veruca Salt of the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* fame — “I want it and I want it now.” Asking the question about acceptance rates seems to be at least partially motivated by a desire for convenient and immediate gratification rather than taking the necessary time to fully research a school for its merits and fit with the student and their goals. For some, this number may determine the program that offers the easiest access to professional school regardless of whether or not it is the best one for them. Yet, a key component often unaccounted for by those asking about the percentage is the influence

each individual student has on their own application. Prospective students may not be thinking of themselves as a variable in the equation but they do have a notable impact on the outcome. Ultimately, it should be about figuring out how they fit with a particular undergraduate school and advising office to maximize their potential; this goes beyond the numbers.

So how can we effectively respond to this question while minimizing the risk of our audience misunderstanding the data? There have been discussions on the NAAHP listserv regarding various techniques to most appropriately address the concern. Some choose not to disclose the number, others give the percentage to the best of their knowledge providing disclaimers on how it is calculated, and others still have their own unique way of addressing it. A possible alternative is to turn the question back around to the student. After acknowledging their question in some way so as not to offend them, it may prove fruitful to ask what they are hoping the number will tell them. This could provide more insight into what they want to know so advisors can address how their services and resources will support them. One response may look like this: “That’s an interesting question. Other students have asked the same one, but they often had different perspectives on what the number really means to them. To better answer your question, can you tell me what this percentage will say to you about our institution? This way I can fill in some of the gaps the number alone may not attest to.”

By answering this way, we may learn more about their current goals and long-term aspirations and be able to share how those may be specifically actualized at our institutions and in the future. Most importantly, the student needs to walk away with a better feel for what working with our offices would be like so they can accurately compare advising services between schools. Thousands upon thousands of people are accepted to professional programs each year, and they each take their own unique path to that destination. There is not one right way to do it, but many. Students may not always realize that what works for one may not for another. Narrowing this all down to a percentage associated with the office and school devalues the work those students did to earn a seat in a program by forging their own path suited to their interests, values, and skills. As pre-health advisors, we must create awareness of the level of responsibility an individual student has for their own success. They decide if they will heed our advice, take advantage of our resources, and how to use them. In the past, there have been

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some very ambitious students who harbored a strong sense of initiative and went on to be accepted without support from pre-health advising offices. Maybe the real question a student should be asking is not our percentage rate but rather what is unique and extraordinary about the advising and services we provide that cannot be found elsewhere and truly offer a competitive advantage.

We must decide in each of our institutions if we want to reveal a percentage to students and how we go about it. However, it might be beneficial for our prospective students if we can help them craft a better question to more fully address what they want to know. The percentage is quick and convenient, but it limits the response such that some very important information about an office is not covered. Elements such as connections for clinical experiences, research opportunities with faculty, information sessions with admissions staff for professional programs, or specialized advising are a few examples. If a student comprehends this, they may be open to suggestions on alternative approaches to gathering information on undergraduate schools other than an acceptance rate.

Hopefully we have also established some trust with this individual by being forthright, ethical, and helpful. It is easy to understand and appreciate why the question is asked. For the average traditional-aged college student, this is likely the biggest decision they have encountered so far in their life, and they are still learning how to critically and effectively evaluate options. As advisors, we are in a position to help students in this process so they can make the best decision, no matter where they end up. Percentages seem like a safe way to do this since they are supposed to be a common language. As a former student of mathematical economics, I often thought of numbers as black and white — something that is very comforting in an uncertain world. Now it seems even the numbers have turned gray.

References

- Provost, L. and Burkert, A. "NAAHP, Inc. Focus Group Report." *The Advisor*, 30.1 (2010): 36-39.
- Levitt, S.D. and Dubner, S.J. *Superfreakonomics: Global Cooling, Patriotic Prostitutes and Why Suicide Bombers Should Buy Life Insurance*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.

