

A COMPARISON OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC COLLEGES

Marilyn B. Gladney
Southern Bell Telephone Company
and
John R. Hills¹
Florida State University

Thinking in many areas can be distorted by stereotypes. In the thinking about, planning for, and counseling of students concerning higher education, the stereotypes about private vs. public colleges can interfere with logic and lead to error. While there are various stereotypes, two illustrations of errors caused by stereotypes are:

- a. inferring the superiority of private colleges because they are hard to get into (the Harvard stereotype) and
- b. inferring the inferiority of public colleges because they have no standards or because they are so big (the University of Kansas stereotype) (Smith, 1956). Examination of private colleges and public colleges as they exist within any particular region might reveal that they were really quite similar in many respects, that they differ in some respects, and that neither their differences nor their similarities fit the stereotypes.

To consider this question, data were analyzed for all colleges, public and private, within a rectangular block of the United States approximately 60,000 square miles in area with a population, according to the 1960 census, of approximately 4 million inhabitants. Within this contiguous area there were 20 public colleges and 27 private colleges. There were universities, four-year colleges, and junior colleges among both the private and the public institutions. Data were complete for all public colleges, but some parts of the data were not obtainable from a limited number of the private colleges. The missing data were not sufficient to distort the general findings to any significant degree. Each college supplied data consisting of Fall entering freshman College Board SAT scores or high school averages, or both, freshman average grades, and the curricular offerings of the institution for the academic year 1963-64. Some of the very small colleges supplied test and grade data on students entering in 1962 also, for use in the study of predictability of freshman grades. The numbers of students in 1964 planning to major in each of the college's programs were also collected.

¹This study was completed while both authors were with the Regents of the University System of Georgia. Mrs. Gladney is now with Southern Bell in Personnel Research and Dr. Hills is now at Florida State University.

The data were analyzed to answer the following questions:

1. Do more students enter public than private colleges?
2. Are public colleges larger than private colleges, on the average?
3. Are the students entering private colleges more academically talented than those entering public colleges?
4. Can grades be predicted with generally greater precision in the private colleges than in the public colleges?
5. Do the private colleges generally have higher admission standards than the public colleges?
6. Are the curricular offerings of the private and public colleges generally different in important respects?

Number of Students

In the fall of 1963 approximately 12,495 people entered the area's colleges and universities as beginning freshmen. Thirty-six percent of this total entered private colleges. Of the 7,236 males, 34% attended private institutions; 39% of the 5,259 females attended private colleges. Of the 24 private colleges admitting girls, 5 admit girls only. The number enrolled in these 5 women's colleges was 44% of all the females entering private colleges in this area in 1963. Over-all, approximately 5 out of every 12 students were females. Thus more students do go to public colleges.

Sizes of Colleges

Public colleges tend to be larger than private colleges. The largest number of private colleges had entering freshman classes of 50 to 100 students, while more public colleges had entering classes of 250 to 300 students than any other size. There are fewer public colleges than private, yet more students enter public institutions. Approximately 2/3 of the students entering area colleges in the fall of 1963 entered public colleges, and 1/4 of the area's

total number of students entered just two of the public colleges. About 1/3 of all entering freshmen in the area enter the three colleges (two public, one private) which enroll over 500 freshmen each Fall. About 1/3 enroll in colleges with classes of two hundred and smaller. There is a fairly sharp break between "small" colleges and "large" colleges in the area, with a gap in the area one might call "middle-sized."

Aptitudes

Mean statistics for SAT V, SAT M, and high-school average (HSA) were computed for both private and public colleges. These means appear in Table 1.

Table 1
Mean Scores for Students Entering
College, Fall, 1963

Sex	Institution	SAT V	SAT M	HSA
Male	Private N=2461	418.3	450.5	26.3
	Public N=4775	437.3	490.4	27.0
Female	Private N=2054	435.8	435.1	29.7
	Public N=3205	413.5	414.5	29.7
Both	Private N=4515	427.8	442.1	28.1
	Public N=7980	427.7	459.9	28.1

The public college males had higher SAT scores. The mean SAT V was 19 points higher, and the mean SAT M was 39 points higher. The private college females, however, have higher mean scores (by about 20 points on both V and M) than those in public colleges. High school averages for males in public vs. private colleges differ by only .7 of a point while HSA's for females are exactly the same.

When males and females were combined, the only difference between private and public colleges appeared in the mean for SAT M, a difference of 18 points in favor of the public colleges. In toto, it appears that the scholastic aptitudes as measured by SAT and HSA of students entering private or public colleges are similar to a remarkable degree.

Prediction of Grades

The correlations for predicting freshman average grades from SAT scores and HSA were computed for each college. The average of the multiple correlations for the 22 private colleges who required the SAT was .63, and the average for the public colleges was .65. Thus, accuracy of prediction of freshman grades is very similar in the two sectors of higher education. Prediction of college grades from high school grades alone, without test scores, is also about as accurate in private as in public colleges. The average private-college correlation is .55; the public, .57.

It is interesting to notice that in both public and private colleges SAT V and M scores have significantly higher correlations with FAG than with HSA. Table 2 gives the average correlations between the SAT scores and FAG, and SAT scores and HSA, separately by sex. The average correlations between grades and SAT scores are remarkably similar in public and private colleges. Only one significant difference was found; the correlation for private college males between V and FAG (.38) was significantly larger than the correlation of .31 for public college males.

Table 2
Average Correlations Between SAT Scores
and FAG, and SAT Scores and HSA
1963

Sex	Type of College	\bar{r}_{V-FAG}	\bar{r}_{M-FAG}	\bar{r}_{V-HSA}	\bar{r}_{M-HSA}
Male	Private	.38	.38	.22	.31
	Public	.31	.34	.20	.26
Female	Private	.46	.46	.32	.35
	Public	.49	.46	.33	.36

Admission Standards

When data on all applicants (rejected, accepted-but-didn't enter, and entering) could be obtained, it was possible to determine the proportion of applicants who were accepted by each college at each level of predicted freshman-average grade. Complete data were available for all public colleges but for only one-half of the private schools. At each college there is a high-school average at (and above) which

every applicant is accepted. To compare admissions standards in public and private education, one might compare the means of these 100%-admissible high-school-average values for the two kinds of institutions. The mean for private colleges was 32.6 and for public colleges it was 33.3. These means are very similar; to be sure of being accepted in either public or private colleges in Fall, 1963, a student would, on the average, need to have above a B performance in high school (A=40, B=30, C=20, D=10, F=0). Of course, both public and private colleges vary widely on the 100%-admissible standard. At some an HSA of 40 does not assure admission; at others a D+ HSA (16) is good enough to assure admission.

At each college there is also a level of predicted freshman average grade (PFAG) at which, and above which, an applicant is certain of admission. The mean PFAG for a probability of 1.00 of acceptance at private colleges for Fall, 1963, was 2.2. The mean for public colleges was also 2.2 (A=4.0, B=3.0, C=2.0, D=1.0, F=0). Again, the standards vary widely from college to college for both public and private colleges, but they are very similar when the public colleges as a group are compared with the private colleges as a group.

Curricular Offerings

Curricular offerings or programs of study in private and public colleges were compared on the basis of the number of students enrolled in each program in 1964. Among the private colleges, liberal arts and education programs led all other fields. These two curricula enrolled approximately the same numbers of students. Business administration was third followed by ministerial programs. Education was the most popular program among the public colleges, with business administration second and engineering third. No engineering degrees were offered in private colleges and no ministerial degrees were offered in public colleges. Table 3 shows for both sectors of higher education the numbers of people reported in 1964 as being enrolled in the ten most popular curricula. While the numbers are not very precise, and some decisions about which category best fitted certain curricula might be questioned, it is clearly the case that more people are in education programs than any other, but business programs have nearly as many. Engineering students also abound, but after those three there is a sharp drop in size.

Table 3

Numbers of Students Enrolled in the Ten
Most Popular Curricula in 1964

Curriculum	Number	Curriculum	Number
Education	11,621	Languages (inc. English)	2,270
Business	9,277	Nursing	1,345
Engineering	8,214	Medicine	1,321
Natural Science	3,138	Social Science	1,179
Liberal Arts	2,927	Law	975

Summary

Over-all, it appears that the most distinctive differences between private and public colleges in this 60,000 square mile region of four million people are in the numbers of students entering the two types of colleges and in the sizes of the entering classes. More students attend public colleges and private colleges tend to enroll, on the average, 100-150 fewer students as entering freshmen than do their public counterparts. There appears to be no appreciable difference in scholastic aptitude between private and public schools. The accuracy of prediction of grades is about the same in the two types of colleges, and so are the admission standards. One could conclude that the same types of students attend private and public colleges, but private colleges provide ministerial training while public colleges produce the engineers.

References

- Smith, G. B. Who would be eliminated? A study of selective admission to college. Kansas Studies in Education, Vol. 7, No. 1. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1956.