Admissions in Transition

From test-optional applications, to questions about ChatGPT, to the Supreme Court's new limitations on considering race and ethnicity, college admissions are in flux. Admissions Dean Whitney Soule dissects the current state of play and how prospective applicants can navigate it.

By Trey Popp

"I hope everybody loves their job at Penn, but I think I have truly one of the best." So says Vice Provost and Dean of Admissions Whitney Soule, who started in the post in July 2021 after three decades of experience in the field, latterly as the dean of admissions and financial aid at Bowdoin College ["Gazetteer," May|Jun 2021].

The past three years have not exactly been smooth sailing for college admissions officers. Soule landed at Penn in the midst of pandemic disruptions and has spent the latest cycle bringing her office into compliance with a new legal paradigm in the wake of the US Supreme Court's June 2023 ruling effectively ending race-conscious admissions in higher education. But Soule professes to be energized by her work. "I love Penn," she declares, "and the applicant pool is the future. Those are the students who are pursuing dreams for themselves—and their dreams are big."

In late January, Soule spoke with *Gazette* senior editor Trey Popp about navigating some of the new challenges in college admissions. She began by laying out five values that guide her team's work. The first is "collective care," an overarching ethos that centers the experience of prospective students for whom applying to college is fraught with anxiety and doubt. "Intentional equity," the second principle, stands for the effort to "offer the opportunity for applicants from all kinds of backgrounds and levels of support to fully represent themselves in a way that we can evaluate them" on the basis of their achievements and potential, rather than their access (or lack thereof) to costly score- and resume-boosting tactics.

"Clarity" is the next point of emphasis. "People want to know how everything works," says Soule, "but they can't have all the details, because they're not reading 60,000 applications with us. So what we can do is be really clear about what is important to us, what we're reading for, what we're trying to evaluate and where we go to the application to look for it, and why the questions we're asking help us get there. So the more clear we can be, the more likely each student may feel secure in being able to prepare an application for us that they can feel really good about."

The last two tenets relate more to her office's operational style, and how her team thinks about deploying limited resources. "Directed focus," Soule says, is intended to help her team evaluate new ideas for recruitment and assessment without losing sight of the central goal of creating a class that is well-suited to Penn. "Strategic boldness" is a prod to embrace projects that may advance the other values.

The rest of the conversation delved into more detail about how Penn Admissions is facing particular challenges, and Soule's advice for high school students who are about to plunge into the process. Here it is, edited for concision and clarity.

When you began your tenure, the University was returning to something like normal academic life after the pandemic disruption. Your office was emerging from pandemic-era challenges as well, in areas ranging from student recruitment to applicant assessment. I wonder whether any of the practices Penn Admissions had implemented to address those challenges struck you as successful enough to retain—or whether you felt there were opportunities to start fresh in some regards.

Both. When I started, all of our work was still virtual. But there was an unintended benefit from COVID: We all learned the technology, and so did the students, which meant we could connect to them wherever they were. That created a degree of equity that was impossible to achieve with traditional in-person recruitment. And it really brought to light how

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA LIEDO

much we could do with technology and how far the reach could be. It's not perfect, because technology's not readily available to everybody, but it absolutely has increased the opportunity of how we can connect. And when we came back to welcoming visitors to campus, and also traveling, we began working through which opportunities really could only work well in person, which ones could stand alone as virtual and be really effective, and which ones could be replicated in both modes—just to expand how students could experience us.

Penn piloted a test-optional admissions policy in 2020–21 and has continued that approach through the current cycle. Now that you have a few years of data, what conclusions have you drawn about the impacts of the test-optional policy on the applicant pool and the eventual enrolled classes?

It's more complicated than most people expect. We, along with our peers, have been using testing in admission since its advent. But for Penn, test scores were not integrated directly into the academic assessment evaluation, even pre-COVID. The primary assessment was, and still is, dependent on the curriculum that's available at a student's high school, what the students chose to take, how well they were doing with those courses, and the ideas that they've conveyed in their writing and how their teachers describe them, and so forth. Testing was present, but it was separate. So when Penn had to pivot to test-optional during COVID, that primary fundamental approach to academic assessment didn't have to adjust.

It's our job to consider what required application materials are sufficient to support our evaluation. And it's not as simple as just looking at the GPAs of the students who submitted testing and those that didn't, because every cohort of enrolled students that we're going to be tracking at Penn, since becoming test-optional, has had many other influences—partly what year they were in school when COVID happened, but also what's been happening in the world of education since. So it takes really careful analysis to determine the effect of a test-optional application on evaluation and enrollment. So we're taking it year by year.

So the jury's still out, in other words?

We haven't decided what we're doing for next year's applicant pool.

Test-optional policies have made it hard for some students to decide whether or not to submit their scores, because when low-scoring applicants withhold them, the institution's median scores get inflated. Anecdotally, I've heard about kids scoring in the 1500s on the SAT and deciding not to submit what seem like very good scores to some universities. What advice do you have for applicants in that regard?

The College Board has studied this. Students are more likely to send their test scores if their scores fit in the ranges of what schools are publishing. And if their scores are below that they're more likely to withhold them. That's not surprising. The advice for Penn applicants is that the basis of our academic evaluation is separate from reviewing the test scores. So students need to understand that when we're thinking about them as an applicant, we're talking about the courses they took, how well they did in those courses, what that progression has been, and how does that align with what they want to be doing at Penn? They should be thinking about their test scores relative to whether or not they think those test scores validate that or elevate that in some way. For the general public, it's harder to give advice because every school's admission evaluation process is unique, so where tests fit in might be different somewhere else.

The last year has focused public attention on college admissions like never before. In June the US Supreme Court ruled that race-conscious admissions programs at Harvard and the University of North Carolina were unlawful under the Equal Protection Clause of the US Constitution and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. In a Penn Admissions blog post you wrote: "In light of this ruling, we will need to review and revise our practices to ensure that we are fully compliant with the law. What will not change is our commitment to creating a diverse community as central to the educational experience at Penn. … Simply put, we cannot fulfill our educational mission without honoring and supporting the many and varied lived experiences of our students, faculty, and staff. While the way we do our work will change in compliance with the law, our respect for this foundational principle will not." What has the admissions office determined that the law now requires, and how did your work change this year as you strove to comply with it?

This is really challenging. We have adapted our review processes to adhere to the law, and we've done a lot of training with our staff. And now here we are, in the middle of application season, reading applications—and there is a lot that remains familiar. We are reading students with the full integration of complexity that they reveal about themselves. Every student is unique, so we're still reading that way. But do we know the race or ethnicity of applicants, like we did before? No, we don't. Yet we're reading every detail that they provide, and we're trying to understand how they see themselves and how they want to contribute. And that part feels consistent, even with less information.

Soon after the Supreme Court ruling, and in connection with a separate lawsuit by the same litigants, Yale University announced a series of admissions policy changes: that it would update its training materials to make the ban on considering race explicit to application readers and admissions counselors; take "technological steps" to ensure that nobody involved in admissions decisions has access to data on the racial identity of individual applicants; refrain from producing reports on the aggregate racial or ethnic makeup of applicants or admitted students; and ensure that race is not a factor in financial aid calculations or awards.

Has Penn adopted any new practices along these or other lines?

The straightforward answer is that anybody involved with application review and selection in Penn Admissions does not have access to any reporting or data fields that are related to race—in aggregate or at the record level. We just can't see it.

Has that change been refreshing? Has it been challenging?

The substance of how we think about reading the totality of a student within an application and the information they provide to us to think about them as an individual—that part does feel familiar. What is different, though, is that we can't know the racial or ethnic makeup of the class that we are intending to admit, and what that might represent for the students who enroll. And when we're thinking about the value of a diverse environment in a learning community, that feels really different to not see that kind of information, which we're used to understanding as one of the things that is coming together within our class.

The Court made an allowance for applicants to address their racial or ethnic backgrounds within the context of personal statements and essays, if applicants feel that those aspects of their identity illuminate the path they've traveled through school and life. Have you noticed an uptick in application essays that mention or focus on race in this manner?

It's hard to say. Before this ruling, many students were referencing aspects of their identity as they described their experiences and growth and ambition in their writing. So it would be impossible to quantify if that's more or less now; it's not new for students to incorporate their views of their identity in their writing. Of course we have to be careful to consider this only within the bounds of the ruling, but having students include their identity when talking about their lived experience and ambitions and so forth is not new.

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Some universities have added essay prompts that appear to invite just that kind of reflection. Has Penn done so, and why or why not?

We did not add a question, mainly because we already had one in our application that invited students to think about how they might contribute to community, and how Penn's community might influence them. [Editor's note: The essay prompt is, "How will you explore community at Penn? Consider how Penn will help shape your perspective, and how your experiences and perspective will help shape Penn."] That question remains. Often when students think about how they might contribute to Penn's community and how it might influence them, they reflect on who they are and what's important to them, and their own definitions of what community looks like. So it's been a valuable question, because students are going to interpret the idea of community in their own way, and then respond to it like that.

Last year Penn added an interesting essay prompt to its application: "Write a short thank-you note to someone you have not yet thanked and would like to acknowledge. (We encourage you to share this note with that person, if possible, and reflect on the experience!)" Can you tell me about how you landed on this prompt, and how applicants used it?

Yes, and let me say that this is by far one of the most favorite experiences of my more than 30 years in higher-ed admissions. We were looking for a prompt that would give students the opportunity to show us that they could accept positive influence from other people. It's just a central component to being able to collaborate and learn. And we wanted to think of a question that wasn't tied to a

kind of experience that would require a student to have access to certain resources. We were playing with a couple of different sample prompts when I happened to be in a phone call with Professor Adam Grant and Professor Angela Duckworth [G'03 Gr'06], and they agreed that what we were trying to get to was really important. They both quickly recommended having the students write a thank-you note. Then they directed me to Professor Martin Seligman [Gr'67], who looked at our prompt and endorsed it.

That year we had about 60,000 first-year applicants. They all wrote thank-you notes. It was one of the most unbelievable experiences to read those thank-you notes, because they were all so genuine and personal. But even more, because some of those students read their thank-you notes to the person they were thanking—and some of *those* people wrote to us to thank us for that experience, because it was so powerful. There were teachers and college counselors who told us that they were really moved by what the student wrote, and also struck by the power of the exercise, so they had started incorporating it as part of their classroom experience or their college guidance preparation.

Photo by Lisa Godfrey courtesy Penn Admissions

So I think it was good for students, and it did bring us the kind of information we were looking for. But the fact that it had this exponential effect was more than we could have ever anticipated. We've kept the question this year, so now we're getting to read more of them. And it's truly amazing.

Have you noticed any significant changes in this year's applicant pool, or the resulting class so far, compared to past years?

We're right in the middle of it now, but our application pools for both early decision and regular decision increased significantly. We're up just about 10 percent overall in our applications this year, and it's up in all kinds of categories. That presents us with more challenging choices because our class size will be the same. But it's a remarkable applicant pool. The students and their experiences, their aspirations, what they have committed to in their high school years already, and what they tell us they want to do with a Penn education is both humbling and inspiring.

Penn Admissions has for many years pursued low-income students through programs like QuestBridge and the Coalition for College (formerly the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success). How do you see those efforts fitting into Penn Admissions' approach to recruiting and admitting students under the new legal paradigm?

In terms of the legal landscape, our recruitment can still be very broad, and we do collaborate with organizations that can connect Penn, and all that we offer, to students who are talented, motivated, and ambitious but might not otherwise have learned about us. I would include College Horizons, which is an organization that supports Native and Indigenous students on the path to college, and local organizations like Heights Philadelphia, with whom we partnered over the last couple of years to create and release a free online course on the Coursera platform called Applying to College 101. Coincidentally, that went live on Coursera the same day as the Supreme Court ruling. And within six months we had more than 6,000 learners in there.

And there are other organizations as well, whose ability to do outreach into many different communities is greater than ours if we were to try to do it on our own. And so those partnerships remain really important. We've been thinking about how we can intentionally message the ways in which our community at Penn is diverse, and so are the opportunities within our campus, both socially and academically, so that students can learn about us that way.

Among the last several classes, what proportion of students have been eligible for Pell Grants?

The Class of 2027, which is our first-year class now, is about 20 percent. The year before was right about 19 percent, and the year before that was at 17 percent.

I wanted to bring up one of the biggest developments of the past year: generative AI, and specifically platforms like ChatGPT. Does Penn Admissions condone the use of such tools by students completing their applications? Do you have any advice for high schoolers who will be applying next year in the age of ChatGPT?

It seems like it might lead to an easy answer—*use it* or *don't use it*. But some students are in schools that have embraced that tool and are guiding students on how to incorporate generative AI into their academic work. But then there are students in environments where the use of AI would be considered cheating. And the reality is that many college applicants have relied on generative support in preparing applications—primarily the support of other people, whether that's parents, or college counselors at school, or hired college-prep support. But that kind of support is not equitably distributed among the applicant pool, right? And we have many applicants who don't have adults who are prepared to help them think about preparing a solid application—but ChatGPT is free, and so it's largely accessible. So the way that we've thought about it, for this year, is that applicants have been and continue to be required to sign an attestation when they submit the application that says the work they're submitting is their own. And determining what makes it "their own" is a judgment call and an ethical boundary for them to grapple with, whether that is with the support of humans, or the support of generative AI.

We're attuned to the advent of ChatGPT in this applicant pool, and we'll have a chance to review how we feel this evaluation season went when we're finished.

Is Penn Admissions using any AI-related tools to carry out its own work—which seems to have grown substantially along with the size of applicant pools? If so, what are they and how are they helping you accomplish your mission? If not, what kind of functionality would you look for in order to consider incorporating an AI tool into your workflow?

No, we're not using it. Everybody wants to sell AI to admissions officers. So there's an abundance of people's ideas of how we should use it. We are mindful that it is evolving really rapidly. But I don't see that AI could substitute for a person's discretion or review. So I don't know in what way AI could be useful. We haven't come across the right idea yet.

Let's take a step back into slightly more conceptual terrain. Your job is to enroll students, but then the University's central work begins. How do you interpret Penn's mission in terms of how it wants its students to grow during the journey from Convocation to Commencement?

The way that we interpret how to put a class together is to really think about the qualities that we believe are necessary for the students to be successful with all that the University can both *offer* for students, and also *expect* of students in the way that they participate and collaborate and innovate—and take hold of the experiences that are available to them. Penn continues

to evolve—the depth and breadth of the opportunity that exists for students is always growing and changing—so we can't be aiming for one particular thing. Instead, we think that the students we bring into this environment need to have demonstrated that they are energized by the activity of learning things and connecting information from one area to another, that they see how their experience—both academic and social—influences how they learn, how they problem solve, how they pivot and adapt. Those are the qualities that we know help students come into the Penn space and take advantage of what's available to them.

What kind of student is likelier to gain traction with the admissions office: a well-rounded one, or what admissions officers sometimes characterize as a "pointy" one—someone who stands out precisely because of an imbalance stemming from being off the charts in one very specific area, whether it's competitive robotics, violin, track and field, or what have you?

Both of those traits, and everything in between, are attractive, and really important in thinking about what a vibrant, productive, positively challenging learning environment would be like. So students who have a very specific interest or talent that they have dedicated themselves to, and are really focused on that, they may not have a lot of topic breadth but they're demonstrating this commitment to something that inspires them, and they're taking it to the next level. That's amazing. Things get discovered that way. But likewise, students who have a breadth of interests and can apply themselves in lots of different areas are also demonstrating a mindset of commitment to adapting to a lot of different topics and challenges in different ways. And they're also the ones who will likely invent things. And the power of having both, and everything in between, in the enrollment is that the creativity around questioning and problem solving becomes much bigger when they're all learning together, rather than it being one type of student or another.

Holistic admissions is often framed in terms of creating a class—a group of a couple thousand individuals who in collective terms cover a diverse range of talents and aspirations. Yet for each student who enrolls, college is fundamentally an exercise in individual self-improvement. That's why they go. So there can be a certain tension between the goal of creating a diverse class and the goal of cultivating individuals who have multiple sources of proficiency and potential. How do you think about that tension? Do you see it as a predicament or a source of dynamism?

I do not see it as a predicament. I do see it as dynamism. I think the students who are applying to Penn, and who are choosing to be part of that first-year class, are demonstrating to us that they are interested in being in an environment where they see how they personally will grow and be challenged—and they're also thinking about what they might contribute. So they're articulating that, in their own way, when they're applying. It's an experience that our students find attractive, and they're able to articulate why they want to be part of it.

Next year a whole new crop of high school students will begin thinking about their college options and how to pursue them. What's your advice for how they can get the most out of the process?

What I'll offer is also a really big challenge to students who are teenagers, which is to be self-reflective. Self-reflection at that age is not necessarily where they would go first, but when students read the questions that schools are asking them to answer—or even in the college searching part, when they're thinking about where they want to go—there's an opportunity to think about *Where do I want to be?* And that's different. Because when the mindset is around, *I need to get into this place*, then the work becomes, *What do I need to do to satisfy this institution's interests, so that they'll choose me?*

"We had about 60,000 first-year applicants. They all wrote thank-you notes."

But the reflective opportunity is: *What is it that I like to do? Why does my attention stay on these topics more easily than those? What are the teachers that I've really enjoyed the most, or the projects that I've had, or the activities that are easy for me to pursue and persist when things are hard?* Think about what is common among those experiences, and then look for a college or university that values those same things. Then the student is in a place of thinking: *This is already important to me, so how do I articulate this very important thing or things to the school that also cares about these things?* And it makes it much more of a shared demonstration to one another, than the student trying to match an institution sort of arbitrarily.

What about students who have decided that Penn is where they could thrive?

If a student has really set their sights on Penn, and one of the four undergraduate schools, take the time to think about not just what's important to Penn, but what's important to me, as a student and an applicant, and how do I find ways in this application to connect what I care about to the opportunity that exists at Penn. You want to make it as clear as it can be what that intentional connection is. That is a really important opportunity for students to take.

It doesn't always result in getting admitted, because the math is tough. There are 65,000 applications for 2,400 places. So there are a lot of students who've done a great job of showing us the connection between what they are inspired by, and what they want to be able to do, and how that fits into Penn. And yet we still can't admit them because we just can't admit that many people.