

How Adolescents Fare Mentally: Single- vs. Multi-route College Admissions

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Abstract : In China, college admissions follow a single-route system where students compete primarily based on academic performance. In contrast, the U.S. uses a multi-route system, offering pathways that consider non-academic achievements such as sports, art, or writing, allowing students to select the route that best suits them. We developed a tournament model to explore which system is more effective at reducing student anxiety. Our analysis indicates that the performance depends on factors such as the overall admission rate, the distribution of quotas among the different routes, and societal norms regarding comparison benchmarks of getting anxious. Since allocating quotas to non-academic routes functions similarly to affirmative action, students with lower academic performance benefit from the multi-route system, while those with higher academic performance may be disadvantaged. Anxiety levels in a multi-route system can surpass those in a single-route system when the proportion of high-ability students is greater than that of low-ability students and the admission opportunities in the academic route fall below the anxiety-inducing benchmark. In societies where being at the average level triggers anxiety, the multi-route system can significantly elevate anxiety rates compared to the single-route system. Even when students can exert effort, the results remain consistent, with effort levels in the multi-route system potentially being lower than in the single-route system. Survey data largely support the model's assumptions and predictions.

Keywords : college admissions, tournament, single route system, multi-route system, affirmative action

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