

LETTER FROM KINGMAN BREWSTER, JR.

TO JOHN MUYSKENS RE ADMISSIONS

YALE UNIVERSITY
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

March 15, 1967

Mr. John Muyskens, Jr.
Director of Admissions
111 Prospect Street

Dear John:

As a new member of the senior Admissions staff and hence of the Committee which will have to winnow the list of applicants this spring, you asked me to mark out some guidelines for that task. I'll try, although I know that once you drop down to the actual facts from the lofty abstractions, no general propositions are very useful.

First, the objectives and goals of Yale, in their most general terms, are not unlike the ambition you would have for any young men you care about. We want Yale men to be leaders in their generation. This means we want as many of them as possible to become truly outstanding in whatever they undertake. It may be in the art and science of directing the business or public life of the country, or it may be in the effort to improve the quality of the nation's life by the practice of one of the professions or the advancement of art or science or learning. While we cannot purport to pick seventeen and eighteen year olds in terms of their career aims, we do have to make the hunchy judgment as to whether or not with Yale's help the candidate is likely to be a leader in whatever he ends up doing. The fact that we cannot tell with any assurance does not mean we can avoid making the evaluation. The admissions decision cannot be either mechanical or riskless.

Second, who will make the best use of Yale's resources? This, at bottom, should determine who deserves the privilege of Yale College for four years. The young man whose total capacities will allow him to get the most out of Yale's opportunities is the one who has the highest claim on the extraordinary resources assembled here. These are the resources of the University as a whole, not just the college, all of whose doors are open to the undergraduate who has the capacity and the motivation to draw upon them.

Foremost in both quality and expensiveness among these resources are the faculty, the library, and laboratory facilities. A sharp and inquiring mind coupled with a capacity and desire to use it constructively and effectively are obviously the most important qualities. Other qualities are always relevant, but there may be a few candidates whose intellectual power is so overwhelming that it alone would justify admission, even if affirmative demonstration of other capacities were absent. For the great majority of applicants, however, there is no way to avoid a weighing process even though the intellectual potential quite properly deserves more weight than any other.

There are non-academic resources and opportunities on which Yale also spends considerable of its patrimony. The residential colleges, masters, and fellows; the athletic plant and coaching staff; the art, drama, and

music facilities; the host of journalistic, dramatic, musical, literary, and other extracurricular activities are not just sources of restful or therapeutic diversion. They, too, offer a challenge to personal development which have an importance of their own, alongside the curricular. A demonstrated ability and desire to enhance such non-academic capacities also should indicate a likelihood that the applicant would make the most of the opportunities of the institution.

Third, the motivation to stretch one's capacity seems to me to have a special value, whatever the area or activity in which this is demonstrated. I suppose this marks me as one who thinks that certain characteristics do have a transferrable quality. I am inclined to believe that the person who has a zest and the self discipline for playing over his head in some aspect of life, who gives every ounce to do something superbly, has an advantage over the person whose capacities may be great but who seems to have no desire to stretch them to their limit.

Fourth, moral concern and consideration for others has its place high in the list of attributes worthy of reward. Not only should demonstrated amorality and selfishness be held against an applicant no matter how bright he may seem, but outstanding public motivation and capacity to sacrifice the self for something larger seems to me to deserve positive appreciation in the admissions process.

Fifth, variety for its own sake is a reasonable consideration in making up a whole class. An excessively homogeneous class will not learn anywhere near as much from each other as a class whose backgrounds and interests and values have something new to contribute to the common experience.

Sixth, convincing equality of opportunity for admission to Yale is a very important consideration. This is important for Yale's sake as well as for the sake of widespread confidence in the promise of an open society. It is also the only way to assure that we are drawing to us the people who give the most promise of being leaders in their time.

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Even if all the considerations I mention are relevant to the screening process, what evidence should be looked at? How persuasive is it?

How do you discern the most important quality: "a sharp and inquiring mind coupled with a capacity and desire to use it?" Performance in school and on national tests is obviously among the best evidence, especially if this performance is recorded not only in grades and tests but in the convincing comments of those teachers who have known the applicant well. An interesting mind and drive may also be revealed in interview or other discussion.

How do you spot a "demonstrated ability and motivation to enhance non-academic capacities?" When dealing with activities supported in the school environment, such as the traditional athletic and organized extracurricular activities, of course both leadership and accomplishment can be recorded and reported. Other talents may of course have been demonstrated completely outside the school; at home, in summer work, or elsewhere. Again the personal testimony of those whose objective judgment is acute and experienced such as counselors, faculty advisors, and coaches may be much more impressive than offices held or letters won.

How do you measure convincingly the "motivation to stretch one's capacity?" This is obviously most relevant when it bears on intellectual capacity or interest. Relationship between graded performance and tested potential may be a clue. Also, sustained improvement in academic performance is encouraging; a falling curve may raise a presumption of failure of aspiration. Again, the testimony of teachers and counselors should reveal more than any recordable performance. The quality you are looking for may of course have been revealed under non-academic circumstances, even away from school or home. Obviously anyone who has reached a truly national level of outstanding performance in any dimension of his life and work deserves high marks for this. It is on these grounds that truly outstanding athletic or artistic or organizational accomplishment may evidence the qualities of self discipline and perseverance and zeal which deserve favorable consideration if the applicant has also demonstrated the academic capacity and motivation to be worthy of serious consideration.

"Moral concern and consideration for others" is almost impossible to weigh in the competitive terms which the admissions process requires. However there may be some cases where its demonstration has been so dramatic or objectively convincing as to deserve reward. On the negative side a demonstrated failure of moral sensitivity or regard for the dignity of others cannot be redeemed by allegations that the young man is extremely "interesting." I do not consider this a counsel of conformity, for I myself consider some of the most heterodox of the young to be the most morally motivated. On the other hand I do not think that pretensions of self righteousness can excuse either cynicisms or willful disregard for the rights and dignity of others.

"Variety for its own sake," as the admissions process moves below the truly outstanding candidates, obviously means that, while we do not have quotas, we want to prevent an over-balance in terms of interests, talents, geographical regions, or of financial or other attribute. For example, I think that we do want a reasonable representation of foreign countries as well as of all parts of this country.

"Convincing openness of Yale's opportunity" does require avoiding prejudice by any generalized favor for particular family or school background, unless there is evidence in the particular case which indicates some special strength as the result of the quality of family experience or the quality of the particular school or the courses or activities pursued in it.

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The only preference by inheritance which seems to me to deserve recognition is the Yale son. Tradition, loyalty, familiarity deserve to be given weight if--but only if--the candidate has survived initial comparison and appears to be as worthy of the Yale opportunity as any of the others being finally considered.

I do think that where social and economic and racial circumstance has made the testable strengths difficult to assess fairly, it is desirable to go as far as possible to uncover other evidence which might bear witness to special potentialities. The standard of admissibility certainly should not be lower for the disadvantaged, but the best evidence of capacity may lie outside the conventional records.

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I am not sure all or any of this is helpful. I am sure your own experienced judgment is better than any classification of factors one by one. However, thank you for giving me this opportunity to express my way of looking at the problem. It has also given me a chance to review these matters with the Faculty Advisory Committee and the Educational Policy Committee of the Yale Corporation. Both of them have approved the views in this letter. I hope you will share this letter with your Committee colleagues so that they may know the considerations which the President and Fellows feel are relevant to the strenuous selection process which is about to begin.

Sincerely,

KB:jtb

cc: Dean R. Inslee Clark, Jr.