



Ji Yeon Kim

Ms. Jennifer Snyder

ESOL 262: Level 8 Academic Writing

9 April 2012

Needed Change for Korean College Entrance System

“I want to study in the U.S.,” is Eun Bee Lee’s habitual phrase. Eun Bee is an ordinary Korean high school student who admires the U.S.’s high school curriculum. She thinks that it would be “cool” to study in an environment where students can actually enjoy going to school and not worry as much about the college entrance. College entrance is extremely important for Koreans. By just getting into a good college, students can have better opportunities for future jobs, while students attending lower level colleges tend to be ignored or looked down on. Despite the importance of college entrance, Korean students are not comfortable with either of the two current college entrance systems: the portfolio method and the test method. Therefore, Korea should combine the two ways of college entrance, because the current system is inefficient for students in diverse ways.

There are two ways to get into college in Korea: the portfolio method and the test method. First method, which has been used for 4 years, is a new way which is to make an application portfolio for oneself. Students can only apply to three colleges. Schools look at the students’ middle and high school G.P.As. In addition to their G.P.As, students may give a list of their experiences, licenses, or certifications to show their interest in the majors. Since the portfolio is a new and unfamiliar way, people tend to use the test method to get into college.

The other method is the test method. Test method is the traditional way which depends on the result of the college entrance exam. When students get their results, they apply to colleges based on their exam scores. The schools mostly look just at the score of the

college entrance exam, pick students, and announce the acceptance. Some colleges ask those who pass the first round to come to the interview or to take an essay test for the final acceptance. The higher the grade is, the more choices one can have. However, the problem is that students cannot take exam until they are high school seniors, and it is only offered once a year. Korea's Ministry of Education had noticed the problem, and was going to try to improve the test method by giving one more chance to take the exam. However, according to the article "New College Entrance Exam" in *The Korea Times*, the Minister of Education revised the decision opposed by some educational critics' pointing out, "holding the exam twice might foster even more private education, such as intensive tutoring during the time between the two tests" (Yoon). The Ministry of Education is very hesitant about any changes in college entrance system. However, the changes must be made.

Korea is a very traditional country. Koreans, especially adults, are stubborn about making changes. Therefore, some educators who are satisfied with the current system of college entrance may maintain that the system has no problems. However, the students, who are the ones most affected by the system, are not satisfied and they see problems. The trouble is that students have a conflict choosing between the two methods. First, before they take the college entrance exam, students may use portfolio method to apply to three schools. When students are accepted by this method, they cannot apply to other colleges using the test method. For this reason, some students apply to colleges that they think they are guaranteed to get in, and regret it after getting their results from the college entrance test, which might have let them get accepted to a better college. Consequently, students do not have confidence about the admission.

Also, the level of middle and high schools differ depending on where students live. For example, people in Seoul know the level of English in DaeChi high school in Seoul, is similar to college-level English. It is a lot more difficult compared to other schools in rural

districts. Therefore, there is an advantage for these students to use college entrance exam, rather than G.P.As, to show their academic ability. For example, when Jong Seok Kim, who is my brother and an undergraduate student at Seoul National University, the best university in Korea, applied to his school by the portfolio method, he was rejected. He had confidence in his application. He thought he had interesting enough experiences that would let him enter SNU. He had traveled to more than 20 countries, was a member of a chorus and an orchestra, had the second level certificate for Chinese characters and Korean history, scored high on the national English test, volunteered for different institutions, got letters of recommendation from his teachers, and was also talented enough in writing that he did not have problems writing a personal introduction. However, it was not enough for him to get accepted to SNU. However, when he applied by testing method, which showed his academic ability, he was accepted.

However this does not mean that the testing method is efficient. Students can take this test only once a year. They prepare for this one test for twelve years. If the student fails to get high scores, he will have to wait one more year to take the test again, which would be miserable. Also, focusing only on college entrance ruins the curriculum. Iris Rotbert, writing in Phi Delta Kappan, discusses the negative effect of focusing on high-stakes test. She asserts an emphasis on high-stakes test leads schools, teachers, and students to focus only on the test and that it replaces the ongoing academic plan. The teachers teach students how to score well on test, rather than giving the important information that would be beneficial for students, but not for the test. For these reasons, the two methods by themselves are neither effective nor beneficial. Therefore, the test method and the portfolio method should be combined.

Since college entrance is very important in Korea, students are extremely stressed. The opponents may argue that students may be more stressed worrying about both

portfolio and test. However the reality is that a focus on the current college entrance system is extremely stressful already and that the new way would be able to relieve burden by spreading the emphasis onto different objects. As a model of this solution, the United States already looks at multiple criteria for college entrances. Many American universities require applicants' SAT or ACT scores, recommendations, course work, grades, and personal essays. Admission officers look at not only the academic factors but also a student's high school experience (College Board). It has been an effective method for admissions. Compared to American high school students, Korean students are so stressed about the college entrance that the pressure even leads to suicide in severe cases. The suicide rate is very high among 15 to 24-year-olds: 15 per 100,000, compared with 10 young Americans ("The One-Shot Society"). If Korea adopts this system, students will do extracurricular activities, such as joining a sports club and learning how to play different instruments. These activities may help students to release their stress and actually prepare for the college entrance.

Furthermore, by doing the activities, students would be able to find their own interests. Korean students nowadays go to after-school academies right after the school bell rings. Parents often wait for their children to come out from the school and drive them to the academies. After they are done with academies, their parents drive them back to their house. This consistent schedule continues throughout the weeks. However if students have time to focus on different objects other than college entrance exam, students will do things which they really like and which interest them the most. For example, let's call this hypothetical student Ji Hyun. Ji Hyun is very interested in international affairs. She wants to join Model United Nations. However, Ji Hyun has a nonstop cycle between going to school, academies, and coming back home, so she is not able to prepare for the Model United Nations, which will be beneficial for the college entrance and her future job. If she had time to prepare for the Model United Nations, she would absolutely join the MUN, which would give her a great

experience. To stop this inefficient cycle and to actually make the college entrance beneficial, the two systems must be combined.

Korean parents spend enormous amount of money on their children's education. It also could be asserted that the amount of money parents spend may shift from preparation for only college entrance exam to preparation for both the test and portfolio, but on further reflection, preparation for both methods is beneficial for students and it could actually reduce the amount of money parents spend. According to Chae Eui-seok, a journalist for *The Korea Times*, 80% of Korea's elementary, middle, and high school students attend after school academies for the preparation of college entrance exam. Furthermore, families in Korea spend 20% of their income on private tuition. If colleges start looking at the portfolio along with the result of college entrance exam, families would not spend as much money because the score would not be the most significant factor on deciding the admission.

Also, cram school is not an effective institution for students in the long run. As contended in the article "End Exam Hell", private institutions concentrate only on pattern drills and memorization, which are skills only needed to score high on college entrance exam. It is neither helpful for students nor parents. Moreover, if students have time, there are plenty of cheap and even free ways to get valuable experience. The anonymously authored Korean article which translates to "35% of SNU, Korea U., and Yonsei U Are the Children of 'Top 10%'" states that at present, 35% of students at the top three universities in Korea are the children of the top 10% high income families. Those rich families were able to afford them expensive private tutoring and experiences from the foreign countries, which gave their children an opportunity to get into the best colleges. This shows that people with money have higher chance to get in to the best colleges. The fact is that ordinary students could also get the worthy experience as much as they want if they had time. There are many institutions that have different classes for cheap prices, such as youth centers. Youth centers, which are

located near the city halls, offer interesting classes, such as guitar, swimming, harmonica, etc. The purpose of the youth center is to help teenagers learn different objects at a cheap price. They even offer free classes for students. Additionally, students can volunteer for different places, which give free experience. It would also look great on the portfolio to show the interests in the particular major. Therefore it does not make sense that combining the two systems would leave heavier financial burden on parents.

After students apply to the colleges, students wait for the admission announcement for about two months. College officers may argue that college will need more time, money, and people for the admission under the new system. This argument may have some validity. However, it would be beneficial for colleges to find a good match. In the article “In South Korea, Searching for a New Kind of Student”, Chung Kwang Hee, a researcher of admissions policies at the Korean Economic Development Institute, says that “[colleges started to ask] what kind of talented young people do we want, and how are we going to find them?” (qtd. in Chandler) This question has prompted the creation of the new the college entrance system: the portfolio method. Colleges do want to have creative and talented students who have different experiences as well as high academic performances. By listing interesting experiences on the portfolio, students would be able to show their interest on the major and the school they want to get in. It may be a sacrifice for colleges to hire more people to look at students’ applications, but it will be a positive sacrifice which will benefit both students and the colleges. As an example of this entrance system, Taiwan already includes portfolio in their traditional test method. Lee Chung-yan, the former Vice President of the College entrance Examination Centre, which was in charge of the new system, said that students would be able to display their abilities and talents (Noi). Therefore, it would be efficient for both colleges and students to find a good match. Since other countries, including United States and Taiwan, use the combination of the two methods, Korea should also

improve their college entrance system.

In conclusion, Korea's college entrance system contains many problems. Both test and portfolio methods are not effective alone by themselves. The improvement should be made by combining the two methods. If this change is made, there would be no such student like Eun Bee, who admires other countries' educational system and who suffers as much from the college entrance system in Korea. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for not only students, parents, teachers, and colleges, but also Korea in a long run.

Works Cited

- “서울·연세·고려대생 35%가 ‘상위 10% 자녀’” [“35% of SNU, Korea U., and Yonsei U. Are the Children of ‘Top 10%’.”] *한겨레* [Hangyurae] 2 Mar. 2012. *Media Daum*. Daum, 2 Mar. 2012. Web. 8 Mar. 2012.
- Chae, Eui-seok. "Korean Education Has Long Way to Go." *The Korea Times* 28 Dec. 2011. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 14 Feb. 2012.
- Chandler, Michael Alison. "In South Korea, Searching for a New Kind of Student." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 57.21 (2011). *Academic OneFile*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.
- College Board. "College Admissions." *CollegeBoard.org*. 27 Feb. 2012. Web.
- "End Exam Hell." *The Korea Herald* 28 Mar. 2000. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 14 Feb. 2012.
- Lee, Eun Bee. Personal Interview. 9 Mar. 2012.
- Noi, Goh Sui. "Taiwan Universities to Look Beyond Test Scores for Entry." *The Straits Times (Singapore)* 4 July 2001. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 5 Mar. 2012.
- Rotbert, Iris C. "A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy." *Phi Delta Kappan* 83.2 (2001): 170. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.
- "The One-Shot Society." *Economist* 401.8764 (2011): 77. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 14 Feb. 2012.
- Yoon, Sung Ah. "New College Entrance Exam." *The Korea Times*. The Korea Times, 28 Feb. 2011. Web. 6 Mar. 2012.