

# Comprehending the Cost: Are Application Fee Waiver statements Readable?

Z. W. Taylor

Z. W. Taylor, The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy

*As the cost of college rises, students and their families seek new ways to save money. Application fee waivers are offered by many postsecondary institutions in the United States, but higher education as a field has not examined whether or not the application fee waiver statement published on each institution's website is readable. This study examined the readability of application fee waiver statements of the public and private institutions charging the highest undergraduate application fees for the 2015-2016 academic year (n = 39). The results suggest that the majority of application fee waiver statements are unreadable by prospective postsecondary students, and no statements were translated into a language other than English. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are addressed.*

**Keywords:** higher education, policy, linguistics, admissions, equity

## Introduction

Clark (2015) found that the average four-year postsecondary application in the United States (U.S.) costs nearly \$42, with institutions such as Stanford University charging \$90 and Columbia University and Duke University charging \$85 per undergraduate application. Elaborating, Clark explained that for students who can afford to apply to multiple schools, these students will often apply to five or six institutions and spend, on average, more than \$300. A report from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (2014) found that 32% of all fall 2013 undergraduates completed seven or more applications. However, for many families living in poverty, the cost of a child applying to multiple institutions may seem impossible: \$300 could represent a family in poverty's child care, food budget, or transportation costs for an entire month (Gould, Cooke, & Kimball, 2015). More recently, for the 2016-2017 academic year, Kowarski (2017) found the average four-year postsecondary application in the U.S. cost \$43, up from previous years. Undoubtedly, college and university application fees magnify the equity and access gap between low socioeconomic (SES) students and high SES students.

However, of the 39 most expensive applications for the 2015-2016 academic year, all 39 public and private institutions waived the fee for students who properly demonstrated financial need by successfully completing an application fee waiver (Snider, 2015). Even so, recent research has suggested that material written by postsecondary institutions—such as an application fee waiver statement—is often unreadable by its intended audience. For instance, nearly 69% of a random sample of 100 articulation agreements for community college students were written above the 16th-grade reading comprehension level, likely unreadable for community college students looking to matriculate from a two-year institution to a four-year institution (Taylor, 2017a).

To date, no research has examined the application fee waiver statement to learn whether aspiring postsecondary students of average reading comprehension ability (between the 11th- and 12th-grade levels) can read and comprehend the document necessary to have their application fee waived: this constitutes a critical gap in the literature.

This study fills this gap in the literature and examines the readability of application fee waiver statements of public and private institutions charging the highest undergraduate application fees for the 2015-2016 academic year ( $n = 39$ ). Here, the research question was simple: Are application fee waiver statements readable by aspiring postsecondary students of average reading comprehension ability at the 11th- and 12th-grade levels? Findings suggest the majority of college- and university-authored application fee waiver statements are unreadable by these aspiring postsecondary students, which is especially problematic for low SES students. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are addressed.

## Literature Review

The readability of the application fee waiver statement has not been examined, and very little foundational work has focused on the college application fee and its effects on the prospective student. Instead, higher education research has targeted elements of the application review process, such as the essay (Ishop, 2008; McGinty, 2004; Warren, 2013), submission of standardized test scores (Shanley, 2007; Robinson & Monks, 2005), alternate application types (Sportelli, 2014), and collaborative, common applications (Jaschik, 2015). Related to application fees, Smith et al. (2015) explained how colleges and universities screen students through the application process. The researchers emphasized that application cost itself is a screening mechanism, potentially discriminating against students who are unable to pay the fee or are intimidated by the fee.

Smith (2011) continued the discussion by explaining that students who apply to one or two additional colleges increase their probability of enrollment by 30-40%, acknowledging that students who are unable to pay application fees to multiple colleges are less likely to be admitted and ultimately earn a postsecondary credential. Similarly, Ayalon (2007) examined a type of strategic application behavior—a combination of parental support, academic ability, and submission of multiple applications—that led to greater applicant opportunity to enroll in a high-quality institution. Yet as Walpole (2003) found, students whose parents earned a postsecondary credential or families occupying high SES allow their children the resources to apply to multiple schools, increasing the chances of postsecondary admission. Here, the ability for wealthy students and families to complete—and pay for—multiple applications widens the postsecondary achievement and credential gap between low SES students and high SES students.

Yet, there are social and financial scaffolds available to low SES students who struggle to procure funds to pay for an undergraduate application. Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, and McCoy (2011) explained that engagement with secondary school counselors as a form of social capital can greatly affect the college application rates and acceptance rates of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The authors argued this strategy could level the playing field and allow students from low SES backgrounds the financial resources and linguistic capital to pay for their application or find fee waivers and/or institutions that do not charge for applications. McGlynn (2009) argued application fees should be universally waived for low-income students, and that such a measure should work in tandem with better education of high school guidance counselors, alerting them of such application fee waiver policies and the inner workings of the college application admission processes. Subsequently, Adams (2015) compiled a list of 25 colleges and universities that do not charge an application fee and indicated that this practice is a slowly growing trend in higher education.

However, diverging from Adams' findings, Gutierrez (2016) argued application fees will continue to rise as these fees represent a large, consistent revenue stream for institutions like Pennsylvania State University, the University of California at Los Angeles, and others that generate hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of dollars of revenue from application fees every year.

Ultimately postsecondary orientation and transition professionals should be aware of not only the financial burdens of higher education, but also the structural barriers low-income students face in alleviating those burdens. By better understanding the language low-income students must comprehend to apply for an application fee waiver, orientation and transition professionals can learn how language may be a screening mechanism to higher education, similar to the fee itself. Given the rising trend of application fee waivers (Snider, 2015), research should interrogate the application fee waiver to ensure it is readable by low SES students in order for them to equitably access institutions of higher education.

## Method

### Data

The data used for this study come from two sources: (1) Institution-specific data extracted from each university's "edu" domain, current as of October 2016 and (2) readability scores calculated by Readability Studio (Oleander Solutions). The sample included the 39 public and private colleges and universities that charged the most for an undergraduate application during the 2015-2016 academic year according to Snider (2015).

### Data Justification

Thirty-nine universities were selected for this study based on a number of criteria. First, this study examines both private and public institutions charging the highest application fees, because extant research suggests the application fee alone can deter low-income students from applying (Smith, Hurwitz, & Howell, 2015). Second, this study examines institutions from different geographic regions with access to socioeconomically and ethnically diverse populations: Snider's (2015) list satisfied this requirement. Moreover, all institutional websites were assessed for their readability during the college application season, which normally runs from early fall (September) until winter (December or January, depending on the institution), making each university's web material available in October especially pertinent to an aspiring postsecondary student's decision-making process.

### Readability measures

This study aims to best triangulate the readability of each college or university's application fee waiver statement by employing a number of industry-accepted, commonly-used readability measures in tandem and averaging their results per Taylor's (2017a, 2017b) foundational work. In addition, each readability measure is nuanced and examines different semantic (word choice) and syntactic (sentence structure) elements of text, allowing for a triangulated estimate of reading comprehension difficulty. The measures and their definitions are listed below:

**The Automated Readability Index (ARI).** This measure calculates the grade-level of narrative text, examining the average word and sentence length of a given selection of text.

thus:  $G = (4.71 * (RP/W)) + (0.5 * (W/S)) - 21.43$ ; where G = grade level, W = number of words, RP = number of strokes (characters and punctuation less sentence terminating punctuation, i.e. periods), S = number of sentences (Smith & Senter, 1967).

**The Dale-Chall Readability Formula (DC).** This measure calculates the grade-level of any document based on sentence length and number of unfamiliar words. Unfamiliar words are defined as words that do not appear on the list of 3,000 most common words for seventh and eighth graders, thus:  $G = (0.1579 * (PDW)) + 0.0496 * ASL$ ; where G = grade level, PDW = percentage of difficult words, ASL = average sentence length in words (Chall & Dale, 1995).

**The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test (FK).** This measure calculates the grade-level of technical documents (manuals and forms) based on sentence length and syllable count, thus:  $G = (11.8 * (B/W)) + (.39 * (W/S)) - 15.59$ ; where G = grade level, W = number of words, B = number of syllables, S = number of sentences (Kincaid, Fishburne, Rogers, & Chissom, 1975).

**The FORCAST Readability Formula (FOR).** This measure calculates the grade level of technical documents (manuals and forms) based on numbers of monosyllabic words, thus  $G = 20 - (M/10)$ ; where G = grade level, M = number of monosyllabic words (Caylor, Sticht, Fox, & Ford, 1973).

**The Fry Graph Readability Formula (FRY).** This measure calculates the grade-level of both technical documents and literature from at least three textual samples of at least 100 words in length, analyzing the numbers of sentences in each passage and numbers of syllables in each sentence. The sentence data is then plotted on an X and Y axis with corresponding grade-level measures (Fry, 1977).

**The Gunning-Fog Index (GFI).** This measure calculates the grade-level of a document based on numbers of sentences and complex words, defined as words that contain three or more syllables with the exception of proper nouns, words made three syllables by adding the inflections “-ed” and “-es,” and compound words composed of simpler words, thus:  $G = .4 * (W/S + ((C/W) * 100))$ ; where G = grade level, W = number of words, C = number of complex words, S = number of sentences (Gunning, 1952).

**The Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG).** This measure calculates the grade-level of any document based on the number of complex words and total sentences. A complex word is defined as one with three or more syllables, and complex sentences featuring a semicolon should be counted as two sentences, thus:  $G = C \text{ per } 30 \text{ sentence passage}$ , where G = grade level, C = number of complex words (three syllables or more) (McLaughlin, 1969).

## Methodology

To answer the research question – are application fee waiver statements readable by aspiring postsecondary students of average, 11th- and 12th-grade reading levels? – college and university websites were examined to locate the application fee waiver statement. To locate the application fee waiver statements, I performed a Google search – as many college students do (Georgas, 2014) – for “application fee waiver” and the full name of the institution. If that did not yield an application fee waiver statement, I used the institutional search tool on each institution’s website using different combinations of these search terms: application fee waiver, fee waiver, application waiver, application cost waiver, no application fee, waived application fee, waived application cost, and waived application cost to apply. . If the search did not yield an application fee waiver statement that detailed how a student can acquire an application fee waiver, I designated the institution as having no online application fee waiver statement, coded as “NO ST.”

Also, if institutional circumstances had changed since the U.S. News & World Report list was created in 2015 and the institution no longer charged an application fee, I designated the institution as no longer requiring an application fee, coded as “NO FEE.” Ultimately, seven institutions did not include an application fee waiver statement on their institutional website, and one institution did not charge an application fee, resulting in a database of application fee waiver statement data for 31 institutions. A list of all 31 application fee waiver statements examined in this study and their dates of access, as well as all Readability Studio (.rsp) files and application fee waiver hyperlinks, can be provided upon request.

## Limitations

The number of colleges and universities in the United States imposes a limitation of this study: thousands of application fee waiver statements exist on thousands of college and university websites. The ability to measure the readability of a larger sample of webpages was hindered by the time-intensive process of the data collection. Furthermore, the list used in this study included many elite institutions often ranked in the top 50 colleges and universities in the United States by U.S. News & World Report, as well as other college ranking agencies and companies. As a result, this study is limited to predominantly large, more selective institutions and those having the highest research activity as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.

Finally, the readability software used in this study—Readability Studio—was the most efficient, all-encompassing readability measure software package available, but sets maximum scores of the ARI (19th-grade reading level), Flesch-Kincaid (19), Fry (17), Dale-Chall (16), and SMOG (19). This means that some application fee waiver statements were written at higher levels, but the text was scored at the maximum for these measures. Future research could analyze a greater number of application fee waiver statements, as well as application fee waiver statements from different types of institutions, including community colleges and trade schools.

## Findings

The results from the readability measures can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Undergraduate Application Fees and Readability of Application Fee Waiver Statements

*Readability Measures*

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Fee</b>	<b>ARI</b>	<b>FK</b>	<b>FOR</b>	<b>FRY</b>	<b>GFI</b>	<b>DC</b>	<b>SMOG</b>	<b>AVG</b>
Stanford University	90	15.1	17	11.7	17+	12	16+	15.5	14.9
Columbia University	85	12.9	13.4	11.5	17+	13.9	14	14.8	13.9
Duke University	85	18.3	16.8	12.1	17+	15.9	16+	16.5	16.1
Boston University	80	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dartmouth University	80	11.5	11.1	11.6	14	11.1	11.5	13	12
UNC-Chapel Hill	80	9.2	10.1	10.7	FAIL	10.5	14	12.5	11.2
U. Southern California	80	13.5	12.5	12.4	17+	13.9	16+	13.4	14.1
Villanova University	80	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Yale University	80	14.4	16	10.7	17+	14.4	14	15.9	14.6
Brandeis University	75	12.6	12.4	12.4	17+	12.3	11.5	14	13.2
Brown University	75	14	12.8	11.6	14	10.2	14	14.1	13
California Ins. of Tech.	75	12.6	12.2	13.4	FAIL	9.7	9.5	12.1	11.6
Carnegie Mellon University	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
College of New Jersey	75	8.4	8.1	12.1	FAIL	9.3	11.5	10.1	9.9
Cornell University	75	16.8	15.8	11.8	17+	12.7	16+	15.9	15.1
Emory University	75	10.9	12.7	11.8	17+	11	16+	14.3	13.4
George Washington U.	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Georgetown University	75	11.5	12	11	15	12.2	14	13.6	12.8
Georgia Tech.	75	8	8	10.6	9	8.4	14	10.1	9.7
Harvard University	75	7.9	8.4	9.1	8	10.1	11.5	10.4	9.3
Kean University	75	13.9	13.3	11.4	17+	14.3	14	14.6	14.1
Massachusetts Ins. of Tech.	75	9.8	10.9	10.8	13	11	11.5	12.3	11.3
North Carolina State	75	14	15	12.2	FAIL	12	14	14.6	13.6
Northeastern University	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Northwestern University	75	18.3	16.4	10.9	16	15.8	16+	16.2	15.7
Rice University	75	13.2	12.8	11.3	17+	12	14	14.3	13.5
Syracuse University	75	10.6	11.7	10.3	13	13	14	13.4	12.3
Texas A&M University	75	12.1	13.1	11.3	17+	12.5	14	14.3	13.5
Texas State University	75	15.4	15.4	12.3	17+	16	16+	16.2	15.5
University of Chicago	75	13.3	13.1	11.3	17+	12.1	11.5	15.2	13.4
University of Delaware	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
UMass-Amherst	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
U. Michigan-Ann Arbor	75	12.7	13.9	11.2	17+	13.9	16+	15.2	14.3
UNC-Wilmington	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
University of North Texas	75	13.1	13	11	13	13.5	14	14.9	13.2
Notre Dame	75	13.9	14.6	11.8	17+	14.4	14	15.6	14.5
University of Pennsylvania	75	10.6	10.2	11.8	FAIL	11.7	16+	11.2	11.9
U. Texas-Austin	75	17.3	17.1	11.4	15	19+	16+	17.7	16.2
Washington U. in St. Louis	75	15.3	15.4	11.3	16	14.1	16+	15.5	14.8
Avg.		12.9	13.1	11.5	13.3	12.5	13.0	14.1	13.3

Boston University, Villanova University, Carnegie Mellon University, George Washington University, Northeastern University, UMass-Amherst, and UNC-Wilmington did not include a waiver statement on their website; Institution 31 did not charge an application fee

+ = measured score was higher than reported score

FAIL = Fry measure failed due to insufficient length of text

Of the 39 institutions examined, seven did not feature an online application fee waiver statement on their website. One institution, the University of Delaware, changed their application fee policy and now do not charge for an undergraduate application. Of the remaining 31 institutions, the average application fee waiver statement was written at roughly the 13th-grade level (13.3), or a level appropriate for a college freshman or sophomore. The most complex application fee waiver statement was the University of Texas at Austin's, written at over a 16th-grade reading level (16.2), appropriate for a master's level student; the simplest was Harvard's, written at roughly a 9th-grade reading level (9.3). Only seven of the 31 institutions wrote their application fee waiver statement at or below a 12th-grade reading level, appropriate for a high school senior of average reading comprehension levels.

Twenty-one of the 31 institutions examined were private schools; their application fee waiver statement averaged at the 13.4th-grade reading level. The remaining ten public schools' application fee waiver statements averaged a slightly lower grade reading level at 13.1st-grade level. The highest average readability score was the SMOG, registering just over a 14th-grade reading level (14.1), followed by the Fry, Dale-Chall, and Flesch-Kincaid measures, all registering beyond a 13th-grade reading level. The lowest average readability scores were the FORCAST and Gunning-Fog, registering at the 11.5th- and 12.5th-grade levels respectively.

## Discussion

This study answered the primary research question: in this sample, application fee waiver statements are too difficult to read for aspiring postsecondary students—high school juniors and seniors—of average reading comprehension levels. However, more troubling than the fact that the average statement scored at the 13th-grade level is that a number of schools do not include a clear, easily-accessible application fee waiver statement, even though Snider (2015) found that every institution examined in this study did waive application fees for students who properly demonstrated financial need. Furthermore, only one institution made progress toward making the application free. Also notable is the range of readability scores: 9.3 and 16.2 represent the simplest and most difficult average readability scores, a difference of nearly seven years of reading comprehension ability. These findings suggest it may be a bit harder to earn an application fee waiver at a public school than a private school, but the sample from this study is too small to generalize this finding.

Focusing on individual readability measures, the SMOG was the highest readability score on average (14.1st-grade level). It is notable that the SMOG only measures the number of complex words, defined as having three or more syllables, per 30-word passage. Perhaps the application fee waiver statements in this sample made too much use of overly verbose and convoluted diction, a problem remedied by substitutions of simpler synonyms. The Fry, Dale-Chall, and Flesch-Kincaid measures also produced high readability scores, and all three measures calculate average sentence length as part of the overall score. Aside from complicated diction, it is possible that application fee waiver statements are too lengthy at the sentence level and could be split into smaller, more manageable sentences. However, the Fry measure requires that a text be at least 100-words in length to be analyzable: of the five application fee waiver statements that failed the Fry measure, four of the five registered at or below the 12th-grade reading level when scored by other readability measures. The data suggest that sentence complexity—and diction complexity—could be the causes of overly complicated application fee waiver statements.

Consider this application fee waiver statement from the College of New Jersey, one of the simplest to read in this study's sample, written at the 9.9th-grade reading level:

TCNJ will waive a student's application fee if they submit a paper copy of one of the following:

- College Board Fee Waiver
  - NACAC Fee Waiver
  - TCNJ Out-of-State Fee Waiver
  - Common Application Fee Waiver (verified by school counselor)
  - A formal letter from a student's school counselor (must contain specific reasons why the counselor believes a waiver is necessary for this student)
- (The College of New Jersey, 2017)

Here, this institution composes a clear statement that neatly bullets every method that a student could employ to have their application fee waived. By avoiding complete sentences and complex subject-verb agreements, the College of New Jersey composed a simple statement that would likely be understood by aspiring postsecondary students of average reading comprehension ability. Moreover, the College of New Jersey included their application fee waiver statement directly underneath their Application Requirements for Freshman Applicants, a location that is likely easy to find for any aspiring postsecondary student, as the link to the Common Application is also found on this webpage (The College of New Jersey, 2017).

Then, consider Cornell University's application fee waiver statement, one of the most difficult to read in this study's sample, written at the 15.1st-grade reading level:

## Fee Waiver

Cornell's application fee is \$80, and you are required to submit it with your Common Application. Please note that Cornell cannot process your application without the application fee or a fee waiver. Please follow the Common Application instructions. To apply for a fee waiver, please submit one of the following documents:

- The Common Application fee waiver request completed by your guidance counselor/college advisor as part of the school forms process (online submission available at [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org));
- The College Board Request for Waiver of College Application Fee form (obtainable from your guidance counselor/college advisor if you used SAT Reasoning Test or Subject Test fee waivers) or the ACT Fee Waiver Form (obtainable from your guidance counselor/college advisor if you used ACT fee waivers);
- The NACAC Application for Fee Waiver Form completed by your guidance counselor/college advisor;
- A letter from your guidance counselor/college advisor, or representative from a social service or community agency, stating that the fee would cause financial hardship;
- If you cannot apply for a fee waiver by one of these methods, please contact the Undergraduate Admissions Office at 607.255.5241. Mail fee waiver documentation to: Undergraduate Admissions Office, Application Processing Center, East Hill Plaza, 349 Pine Tree Road, Ithaca, NY 14850-2899. (Cornell University, 2017)

Here, Cornell's choice to compose complete sentences and sentence fragments led to complex sentences and a high overall readability level. This reading level increased because of the diction Cornell chose to convey how to apply for the waiver using various forms. Terms such as "obtainable" (Cornell University, 2017, para. 3) and "community agency" (Cornell University, 2017, para. 5) may be unfamiliar to aspiring postsecondary students, especially first-generation students who do not have a parent, guardian, or support network when completing the postsecondary application process. It is notable that both the College of New Jersey and Cornell included the College Board and National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) fee waiver forms as part of their application fee waiver statement, but the diction and sentence structure of the articulation of each fee waiver form is markedly different. The NACAC fee waiver is easily found on the NACAC website, and the form includes all of the information necessary for a student to submit in order to have their application fee waived (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2017). Therefore, if both application fee waiver statements include hyperlinks to the NACAC form, it seems redundant for Cornell to add the sentence fragment "completed by your guidance counselor/college advisor" (Cornell University, 2017, para. 4), as this information is self-explanatory once the applicant clicks on the hyperlink to the form.

Finally, the difference in readability difficulty of application fee waiver statements was negligible between private and public schools at 13.4th- and 13.1st-grade level respectively. However, 26 of the 39 institutions examined (66%) were private, informing aspiring postsecondary students that public institutions may charge less for an undergraduate application than their private peers. This finding may be problematic for low-income students who may not live near a public institution, as low-income students may struggle to procure affordable transportation to their institution or housing near their institution (Hébert, 2018).

## **Implications for Orientation and Transition Professionals**

Many application fee waiver statements in this study's sample are likely unreadable by postsecondary education's largest target audience: high school juniors and seniors. As a result, orientation and transition professionals should audit their communication and work with admissions offices to ensure orientation and transition documentation is readable by a wide audience. Beyond the findings presented in Table 1, no application fee waivers in this study were written in a language other than English, echoing Taylor's (2018) work which found four-year institutions in the U.S. rarely translate admissions materials into languages other than English. Therefore, orientation and transition professionals should ask two questions of all orientation and transition material meant for a student audience. First, is the communication written simply? Second, is the communication translated for students who may not speak fluent English or whose support networks do not speak fluent English?

As Gofen (2009) suggested, low SES students are most at risk of lacking the cultural and financial capital to gain postsecondary admission, and often these students do not have college-educated parents to assist them during the application process. Furthermore, extant research has demonstrated the importance of the high school counselor in the postsecondary exploration process (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Those working in enrollment management, orientation, transition, and recruitment units should communicate with high school guidance counselors to facilitate smooth processes for low SES students in particular, including making the directions for application fee waivers as clear as possible. This collaboration process could include standardizing the language used in application fee waiver statements in an effort to avoid complicated, higher education jargon that may be unfamiliar to first-generation college students, English-language learners, or students from low SES backgrounds.

Excerpted from Cornell's application fee waiver statement, it simply cannot be assumed that an aspiring postsecondary student or their support network knows about the College Board and what role the College Board plays in promoting postsecondary access. In addition to jargon, those working in orientation, transition, and enrollment management should explore how their unit uses institutional acronyms (such as TCNJ) and external acronyms (such as NACAC) in materials meant for student audiences, as it would be unlikely that all aspiring postsecondary students know who or what NACAC is or does or make the connection that TCNJ stands for the College of New Jersey. Erring on the side of caution and comprehension, orientation and transition professionals should not assume newly-admitted students are well-versed in the jargon and acronyms frequently used by professionals working in the higher education system.

In terms of readability of application fee waiver statements, institutional-level readability audits of material meant for student audiences should become policy. Years ago, President Obama mandated a simplification of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in his higher education agenda (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Recent research suggests that the average American adult reads and comprehends at just above the 7th-grade reading level (Clear Language Group, 2016), while only 37% of graduating high school seniors can read and comprehend at the 12th-grade level (National Assessment Governing Board, 2016). For those working in orientation, transition, and enrollment management across the country, it simply cannot be assumed that aspiring postsecondary students—and their parents, guardians, friends, and support networks—can read and comprehend written material produced by the institution. Postsecondary institutions should follow President Obama's lead and simplify the application fee waiver process akin to his mandated simplification of the FAFSA. This could be achieved by employing a wide variety of low-cost or fee readability applications that can process text and audit readability levels in a matter of seconds. For instance, the Flesch-Kincaid test is built into all Microsoft Word applications, and this test can be used to quickly and easily test the readability of a student-focused document to ensure that it is written as simply as possible. Moreover, Hope (2017) provided a concise list of freely available readability tools for college and university registrars to use when composing materials meant for student audiences.

Ultimately, orientation and transition professionals work to orient and transition individuals to their new lives as postsecondary students. Ensuring that newly-admitted students are supported is important, yet this support may go unexperienced if orientation and transition professionals do not speak to these students in a language they understand. For the benefit of all aspiring and current postsecondary students, the readability of postsecondary materials should be addressed, and those working in orientation, transition, and enrollment management can lead the way.

## Conclusion

The rising costs of a postsecondary education have been well documented and discussed (Goldrick-Rab, Anderson, & Kinsley, 2016; Heller, 2007; Sobel, 2013). In a move to make higher education more accessible for students—including low-income students—some U.S. institutions have waived application fees for all undergraduates, such as the University of Delaware in this study's sample. However, if application fee waiver statements are unreadable, this failure to communicate could lead an aspiring postsecondary student to decide against applying to an institution of great fit. Although \$43—the average cost of an undergraduate application fee (Kowarski, 2017)—may seem paltry to some, this dollar amount could determine whether a student attends an institution. Such a monumental decision should not be unduly influenced by an unreadable application fee waiver statement.

For professionals working in enrollment management, recruitment, and the many orientation and transition departments on college campuses across the country, simplifying communication with students should be prioritized. Just because an application fee waiver exists does not mean a student can understand the waiver and complete the fee waiver process. Similarly, because a student can access an institution of higher education does not mean they understand everything about the college orientation and transition process, including its language. Comprehension of postsecondary materials simply cannot be assumed. Beginning with the application fee waiver, an examination of the readability of many postsecondary materials would stretch a long way toward equitable postsecondary access and outcomes for first-generation, low-income, and English-language learning students. It might just stretch their wallets, too.

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