
December 17, 2008, *4:19 pm*

Q. and A.: College Admissions

Updated on Dec. 19 at 6:17 p.m.: The final set of answers to reader questions has been posted. No more questions will be taken at this time.

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Updated on Dec. 18 at 4:50 p.m.: The first set of answers to reader questions has been posted.

Original post: For high school seniors scrambling to complete essays, collect recommendation letters and construct well-rounded packages, college application deadlines are looming, in a seemingly inscrutable admissions process.

To get an inside perspective, we solicited advice from some gatekeepers. This week, a panel of admissions deans from Yale University, Pomona College, Lawrence University and the University of Texas at Austin will answer selected reader questions.

But first they answered a set of questions from Times editors, discussing common misperceptions, standardized tests, financial aid, essay writing, fairness and what not to do when trying to make a good impression.

The Panelists:

Jeff Brenzel, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., which in 2007 had 5,275 undergraduates and 6,083 graduate and professional students.

Bruce Poch, Vice President and Dean of Admissions at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., which has an enrollment of 1,520 students.

Steven Syverson, Vice President for Enrollment and the Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis., which has 1,429 full-time undergraduates.

Bruce Walker, Vice Provost and Director of Admissions at the University of Texas at Austin, a public university with 11,000 graduate and 39,000 undergraduate students.

Questions from readers (updated on Dec. 19 at 6:17 p.m.):

Q.

Would you be willing to comment on homeschooled students and the college admissions process? We have four children we are homeschooling and we hope to continue that up until they go off to college.
—Elizabeth

Q.

Do you have a bias against homeschooled students? They don't always have the classes available to them, such as AP, honors, labs, etc. If you don't have a bias, what do you look for in a homeschooled student? The transcript may include nonstandard courses. How do we let a school know, other than with standardized test scores, how they might be a good fit for that school?
— Leslie Howard

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: Homeschooling is a more recognizable educational enterprise than it once was. This has made directors of admission more comfortable with their ability to properly evaluate a student's readiness for the rigors of a challenging college curriculum and a student's social adaptation skills. We recognize that there are many ways to get a rigorous education, and AP and honors classes are just two of the most popular examples.

We probably provide better service and a more complete and personal evaluation of our homeschooled children than we do to our more traditional applicants.

While homeschooled children present slightly different application materials, the differences are shrinking. We are seeing parents become more entrepreneurial in finding good educational experiences for their children, and more parents are pooling resources to provide the more specialized subjects in the sciences. The Web has allowed for a much broader and more organized enterprise than was ever possible. Even the term "homeschooled" has become a less accurate description of where learning takes place. The term is more descriptive of where the administrative staff resides and where the student's "home room" might be.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: We welcome homeschooled students. Just as with high schools, there is great variation in the strength of the preparation we see among homeschoolers. And in many instances, because they are not presenting a traditional set of credentials, it is important for homeschoolers to be particularly thoughtful about what they will include in their application. Some will submit a number of SAT subject tests taken over the course of several years as a way to document their mastery of these areas. Others will prepare for AP exams as another way to document, with a traditional metric, the rigor of their work. Many will submit one or more substantial works they have done as part of their courses.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: I do have skepticism about some versions of home schooling. We will seek concrete evidence of preparation which may, for better or worse, fall both to a wider range of standardized testing but also to evidence of collaborative work with other students both academically and socially. The home schooled student does carry an additional burden of proof. How to address it?

Good and deep articulation of the courses of study followed. Representation of knowledge acquired and intellectual skills developed. Interview if possible. Admissions officers may rely more heavily upon standardized testing than we would like because the transcript of a home schooled student will carry the imprint of a parent and the references if written by a tutor or parent cannot address questions we would have regarding the engagement of a student with a teacher and peers in a classroom or collaborative learning environments.

Anticipate what we would like to see. Develop a full curriculum and make sure math and laboratory sciences are part of the experience. Even where general admission requirements may ask only for optional presentation of tests or where no SAT subject tests are required, I suggest that the student present those familiar representations of their work and achievement. If the standard expectation of the college is for two SAT subject tests, send more. Send four or five in different academic areas to fully represent a range of academic exposures.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We see only a few homeschooled applicants, and we do occasionally admit a homeschooled student. Evaluation is usually difficult, however. It helps if the applicant has taken some college level courses, and we can get evaluations from those teachers. We are not keen on homeschooled students where the only evaluations come from parents and the only other information available consists of test scores.

Q.

How well do the criteria used in the admissions process predict future college success? Do colleges track their students' four-year GPAs and such and look for correlations with admissions data? If so, what kinds of trends do you see?
—Jen

Q.

What procedures do you have in place to measure the fairness of your process? What kind of follow-up do you do on your decisions? In what circumstances would you consider one of your decisions to be a failure? —Margaret Heisel

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: Most colleges periodically conduct research to correlate the data they collect during the admissions process with the outcomes experienced by their students. The two "outcomes" typically assessed are GPAs at the college and graduation rates. Not surprisingly, in the majority of studies, high school grades have the strongest correlation with college grades. The SAT and ACT have the next strongest correlation, but this too is not surprising because they have a strong correlation with high school grades.

I believe that defining "success in college" as the college GPA is too limited a definition, as there are many students who have marginal college GPAs but have had very successful college experiences in terms of their personal growth and the things they go on to accomplish after college. Assessing those other types of success are much more difficult than just tracking GPAs and graduation rates, so studies traditionally focus on grades as the measure of success. Most of us can agree, though, that a student who flunks out of college did not have a successful experience, so we conduct studies to try to identify the characteristics of students who have been unsuccessful.

Our application review process is designed to ensure that we give every applicant a thoughtful review and the opportunity to "rise to the surface" of the applicant pool. Some candidates clearly demonstrate are insufficiently prepared academically to be successful in our program, so the rest of their application may receive a less thorough review. If a student fails here academically, due to lack of preparation or ability, we would question whether or not we made the best decision.

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: We attempt to validate the objective factors of our admission process on a regular basis. We test for how accurate they are in predicting freshman year GPA. When attempting to predict longer range outcomes such as graduation or life success there are simply too many variables over which we have no control. There is a great deal that can happen in a student's life over four years that has an effect on their GPA and graduation patterns but nothing to do with their intelligence. Even predicting one-year performance has the problem of variations in grading practices, disciplines pursued, class schedule, teaching styles, etc., making it difficult to get high correlations between test scores and freshman year GPA.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We draw our students from the very most competitive fraction of high school graduates. From a statistician's point of view, there's not much variance in that group – virtually all the students we enroll are extremely talented and accomplished with respect to what can actually be measured in the admissions process. Not surprisingly, they tend as a group to be very successful in school and career pursuits, both in the short and long runs. After they come to Yale, what differentiate them are their individual choices and decisions, not the small differences in their admissions credentials.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: At Pomona, training includes norming exercises where the entire staff will review the same set of applications to share multiple perspectives with our colleagues. The intended benefit is to expose our individual analyses to our colleagues and to consider and represent institutional interests, not personal biases.

There are other checks and balances, too. If someone on the admission staff has an external relationship with a candidate or the candidate's family, they are required to remove themselves from any discussion about the applicant and to keep out of the admission decision. That same restriction applies to faculty members who sit on the admissions committee.

In the end, we face the judgment of faculty and deans who will share their impressions of their students with our staff. Students will also let us know what they think about their peers. We are ultimately responsible to the community as a whole for choosing well and if we get it wrong, we will hear about it!

Q.

How do the colleges weigh the writing portion of the SAT versus the reading and math sections? In other words, are students evaluated on a "2400" scale or the more traditional "1600" measure?
— Barry Schkolnick

Q.

Why don't all schools take the writing portion of the SATs into consideration? I understand that it is important to get an idea of an applicant's passion through their application essay but there is always a good chance that the essay is not a true indication of an applicant's writing abilities since it could have been coached or polished by a parent, tutor, etc.
— Susan

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: Every college has its own system of review and weights different portions of the application differently. Despite the fact that an application essay may not be the candidate's own work, many colleges also feel that the writing portions of the SAT and ACT are not necessarily indicative of the type of writing that is expected in college.

The admission process is imprecise and subjective. Applicants and their families often seek specific, concrete answers about the process in an effort to assess their chances for admission, and many are suspicious that somehow the process will not treat them "fairly" (which translates to: they won't gain admission to the college they most want to attend, despite being a wonderful person who has done well in high school and will probably be very successful after college). College admissions officials are, for the most part, thoughtful, caring individuals. They take their jobs seriously. They read applications carefully. Informed by their institutional priorities at that particular moment in time, they weigh all of the information available to them about students in an effort to make the best possible matches between students and institution. At the most selective institutions, there are far more wonderful applicants than can be admitted. The fact that lots of good students are not admitted does not mean there is anything unfair about the process, even though there is not some magic, objective recipe that will guarantee admission.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: My impression is that the SAT writing test is more and more frequently working into the overall evaluations but that institutional differences certainly come into play.

I confess I am still adapting to the new vocabulary of a 2400 point scale. When I first had students saying, “I got 2230,” I had to quickly run calculations in my head. I knew what 2400 meant. But the reality is that admissions officers do NOT yet seem to talk the 2400s.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We have been getting more comfortable incorporating the SAT writing section into our evaluations, although again, it’s good to remember that at most selective colleges, high test scores characterize most of the applicants and most admissions decisions are therefore based on other criteria.

Q.

Are you willing to publish some aggregate statistics on your admits? For example, would you publish average and standard deviation of high school class rank and SAT scores, broken down by public school versus private school, and whether the student was a legacy or a recruited athlete?
—cah

Q.

Thank you for your explanations of how SATs and ACTs are used in the admissions process. When I researched colleges, I also wanted to use standardized tests as one factor in my evaluation. I’ve searched in vain for average scores on the MCAT, GMAT, GRE and LSAT exams taken by a school’s graduates. Why aren’t these scores available?
— John Martens

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: More statistics are publicly available than you might think, but myths persist despite whatever statistics get published. For instance, a number of readers seem to be under the illusion that Yale, and some its peer institutions such as Harvard and Princeton, cater exclusively to a powerful elite, where less qualified legacy applicants (children of alumni) dominate the admissions process. The truth is that in this year’s entering class at Yale, only 13% of the students were legacies, consistent with classes admitted over the last two decades. Moreover, enrolled legacies on average have test scores and grades higher, not lower, than the average for the class as a whole, and they also outperform their predicted college grades.

Unfortunately, cultural and media obsession with myths about a tiny handful of colleges obscures the real problems in higher education more generally. Among the poor, there is widespread lack of access to adequate K-12 preparation for college and to effective means for financing a college education. Among the affluent, artificial college ranking systems published by profit-driven commercial publications produce a status mentality that disguises the basic good news about our country’s higher education system. Relative to the rest of the world, we are absolutely loaded with high-quality colleges and universities looking for good students, and virtually everything important about student success depends on how a student uses the resources at a strong college, not which one in particular he or she happens to attend.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: Aggregate statistics are quite widely available though the Common Data set which is used for many college guides. Our aggregate representations of recent classes are on our Web site and I think you will find most colleges make that information freely available.

We haven’t cut all these figures up into all the subsets you have asked in large part because it reflects no statistically significant differences. At some point the numbers in those subsets can become small since our

entering class is fewer than 400. (For example, male students from private schools in Montana versus women from Illinois or California or New York City public schools…). But I do take your point that this could be reassuring and provide further transparency.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: While we would be willing to research and provide such statistics, at colleges as small at Lawrence, some of the numbers you seek would not provide meaningful information. You also need to understand that many schools do not provide class rank, and the differences between high schools are as great among publics and privates as between the two groups. Groups like recruited athletes and children of alumni run the gamut from the top to the bottom of the class statistically, so there too, such statistics might not yield much helpful information.

I'm not sure how many colleges even systematically track those graduate and professional school test results for their graduates. And, again, at small schools like Lawrence, the small numbers in each of the categories might limit the value of the compilations.

Q.

I'm curious as to how admissions criteria are altered or shifted in importance for a transfer applicant compared with a freshman applicant.
—Colin J.

Q.

How are transfer applicants from community colleges viewed in the admissions process? What advice would you offer these applicants?
— Maureen

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: There are huge variations in transfer student possibilities from institution to institution. Some have lots of room and some little or none. USC enrolls more than 1000 transfer students each year. Pomona has room for 10 to 15. Obviously different factors affect both of these patterns and common answers will be hard to find.

Transferring to Pomona is tough. There are proportionally many fewer spaces than there are for first year students in huge part because of the high graduation rate of our incoming first years. Space doesn't open up. We look at the high school record, especially for those seeking to transfer as sophomores. We look closely at the college record and the extent to which the student has pursued a general education program which would leave them time to dedicate the time they and we would wish to their electives and their major when they enroll at Pomona. We will explore the reasons for transfer and to understand as best we may about why Pomona and how the student sees life changing in our educational environment. Are they transferring FROM something or TO something?

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: Our unusual system of residential colleges makes the freshman year and sophomore years critical to our undergraduate program. So we maintain only a very small transfer program, limited to 24 places each year.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: In the case of transfers, the bulk of the academic evaluation focuses on the college record.

We welcome transfer applicants from community colleges and treat them essentially the same as transfer applicants from four-year colleges.

Q.

An increasing number of schools are offering their students the choice of studying for and taking the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma. What are your views on this qualification regarding the importance you assign to it in the admissions process and its relevance in preparing students for college? Finally, thanks for taking the time and trouble to participate in this discussion.
—Simon R

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We treat IB programs very much like AP programs in our evaluation. We believe the IB program to be a strong, challenging program for college preparation.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: The IB program is a rigorous academic program that is gaining in popularity here in the United States. Some students take individual IB courses while others strive to complete the entire IB diploma. We view IB coursework as comparable to AP coursework, and will award Lawrence credit for strong scores on either the AP exams or the IB exams (though only those who complete the IB diploma can receive credit for their results on the subsidiary-level exams).

Q.

What recommendations do you make to applicants with learning disabilities. On the one hand, our son has achieved a remarkable academic record which is all the more remarkable given the additional hurdles he has had to overcome. I would think that such determination warrants special recognition. On the other, I suspect that some schools would see only a potential problem they would rather avoid. So should the application refer to these issues or should that wait until post-acceptance discussions about accommodations, etc.?
—NDM

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: It helps us to have specific information about disabilities, whether learning-related or other, because as the questioner notes, it can help us see accomplishments in context and also determine better if we will be a good fit for a particular student. But let me say this: How does it help a student proceed in education and life to be taught that he or she needs to be manipulated or packaged or even disguised in order to gain some imaginary advantage with a college admissions committee? Good students in this country have many, many choices among excellent colleges and universities, where their success is going to depend almost entirely on their own actions and decisions. My general advice to parents is simply to worry less about achieving an admissions edge and to focus more helping your student to be happy, enthusiastic, curious and well-prepared to seize opportunities.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: A student who has worked against longer odds because of a learning disability and who performed well is able to provide evidence that they developed compensation mechanisms. That can work to their favor.

On the other hand, we do sometimes receive calls insisting the C or D grade on the high school transcript was because of a learning disability and that we can't hold that against the student. It will be the performance (and underdeveloped compensation mechanism) not the disability that would work against the student.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: We favor honesty in the admission process and therefore encourage students with learning disabilities (or other potential special needs) to identify that to us in the admission process so that we can put them in touch with the appropriate individuals on our staff to discuss the accommodations available to them. It has no impact on our admission decision, but if the student is skeptical, they can delay bringing it to our attention until after they are admitted. I encourage them to engage the college in dialog prior to enrolling, so that they can ascertain whether or not it will be a viable environment for them.

Questions from readers (updated on Dec. 18 at 4:50 p.m.):

Q.

As a teacher who writes 20 or so recommendations a year and tries to make each letter unique, can you offer any more information about how such letters are read? I try to present as honest an appraisal as possible but sometimes wonder if that's in the best interest of my students. Do you look for what is stated in recommendations? What's not said? After having written literally hundreds in my career, I find myself wondering if the at least 2 hours per recommendation I spend is worth it. Are there cases where recommendations will tip the balance for or against admission?
-Mary

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: Recommendations play a critical role for us, and we deeply appreciate the time teachers put into writing good ones. If you teach at a school from which we receive multiple applications, the same officer will read and evaluate any recommendations you write for those applicants. If each recommendation reads about the same, with numerous positive adjectives but little in the way of concrete detail, the recommendations tend not to be helpful. We look for professional judgment from teachers, not simply warm feelings. And we look to see whether teachers incline toward calling each bright student "one of the best I have ever taught," or instead try to distinguish the really extraordinary individual from those who are strong in the usual ways.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: I am grateful for fulsome teacher references and even more appreciative of those which are candid, sharing the good with the bad. Over time we sometimes get to know a teacher who has written for a number of students. A balanced reference will establish credibility for a teacher and is very helpful for our efforts.

On the other end of the spectrum is the dismay we feel when we see literally identical references written for multiple students from the same classroom. Sometimes that has even meant a telling of the same tale or moment about students who clearly are not connected. That situation reflects more poorly on the teacher than

the student, and while we recognize the enormous burden reference writing does require of the author, we value and depend upon that input from someone who has worked closely with a student.

References can command even greater importance in a residential college environment where our students will live and work together. Gaining a sense of competitive or collaborative instincts and an impression of a student's interest in engagement with peers and instructors provides important insights which can have an impact on the learning communities we are trying to build.

The length of a reference isn't our measure of its worth.

We are also very mindful of the context of high schools. A teacher engaging 200 students per year will not likely have the time to write many pages for each of her students. When they do, we will take notice that a top student has received such a strong endorsement. A teacher in a classroom of 10 to 15 students will often write more.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: Typically, all the documents in an application tend to affirm each other, but occasionally a recommendation, essay, or interview reveals something significant about the applicant that we would not otherwise have known. In most cases, no single document "tips the balance," but in a few cases it does. I encourage writers of recommendations not to spend time summarizing information that will be available elsewhere, but instead to focus on aspects of the student that may be known only to you because of your interactions with them. Specific anecdotes or examples that support your comments are likely to be powerful. A short recommendation that effectively highlights one specific trait, activity, or characteristic can often be the most helpful.

Q.

Be honest: Do you really read all the essays submitted? Or, do you read only for the borderline cases?
- Vinod

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: We do at Pomona. But some colleges use the essays as a tie breaker. And some work in a holistic review which more carefully considers the essay whether for content or writing style. In cases of a generally solid application, an essay becomes increasingly important.

In the case of an otherwise weak application, it may not take much more than a skimming of the essay to seal an impression. A brilliant essay presented in an application with substantial weakness in academic performance will not likely compensate for other concerns and could possibly lead to questions about authorship or editing influences. Essays that reflect or amplify the impression of the person created by the application as a whole are read fully and appreciated.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: At Lawrence University and other small selective liberal arts colleges, all essays and recommendations are read carefully (as is every other document the student submits). When reading an application, we strive to gain a reasonably complete picture of the student — strengths, achievements, and aspirations, as well any particular challenges they may have overcome. Through this process, we seek to identify students who will not only be successful, academically, but who will also contribute to the vibrancy of our residential campus community through their personalities, perspectives and

outside-of-class activities. Academics is foremost, but we want this to be a stimulating, engaging environment in lots of other ways, as well.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We look at every essay from every applicant, and for students who reach the level of serious consideration, essays may end up being read multiple times.

Q.

How do you encourage students to spend their summers? Are professional work experience or programs abroad viewed positively or can some become too gimmicky?
- Evan

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: This was addressed well by one of my colleagues yesterday. Students should follow their passions and develop the aspects of their personalities and proficiencies that are most exciting to them, not the ones they think will best "package" them. Far too many students are spending far too much of their young lives attempting to do "what the colleges want to see in an applicant" in order to someday gain admission to some highly idealized (often hyper-selective) college. Loren Pope, one-time editor of the New York Times Education Section, who passed away earlier this year, spent much of his latter years promoting the concept that the quality of a student's college education has more to do with the student's engagement than with the specific college. Through books like "Beyond the Ivy League" and "Colleges That Change Lives" he argued that there are many wonderful colleges in the U.S. that offer an educational experience as good as (or better than) those at the highest profile colleges (albeit without the pedigree). The college search should focus on finding a college that is a good match for the student – not just the most selective place to which they might gain admission.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We encourage students to make use of their summers in the way they find most interesting. If they undertake a specific program, it should be because it appeals strongly to them, not because they imagine it will look best on a resume. Why? First, it is frankly impossible to know what will look best to a particular admissions committee at a particular college. Trying to outthink or outguess the admissions committee strikes me as a useless exercise, though many book authors and private consultants purvey the illusion that they can do this for you. Second, for both education and life, the best program is the one that you find most valuable for yourself at this point in your life. We also honor and value summer jobs; for many students they are necessary and for others they can be just as important a learning experience as anything else. What's important to us in not what you chose to do for the summer, but what you got out of it.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: While unusual activities may add a great deal to a student's experience and have a profound effect on their world view, for some it just comes across as decorative, not substantive. Is a special experience or summer expected or a minimum requirement? No.

Many of those "special" experiences reflect the educational and economic background of the family more than the curiosity or talent of the student. For example, I believe most admissions officers would assume it's not fair to expect a student who works and contributes to family expenses to take an overseas internship. I confess I often wonder why some students who live in areas that have many social service needs unaddressed

will ignore the local situation but move to another country to perform a similar social service. Is it really a service trip or is it a summer vacation built for college admission purposes? It may be both and that's not a penalty point, but it isn't a bonus consideration either. Is the student whose family connections provided an internship at a high-profile organization more worthy than a student who delivered pizza or tended to family farm commitments? The rest of the application will give us the answer.

Q.

It has long been understood that there are five main facets of an application: transcript, recommendations, standardized test scores, extracurriculars and essays. If a student's transcript is in the weaker half of the applicant pool, but the remaining four facets are quite exemplary, will an elite college be willing to take a chance?
-Jonah

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: The more selective the institution, the more likely the decision for admission may turn on things not so easily quantified. If the application suggests strong basic competence academically, the other qualities of a candidate become interesting and often determine the outcome. I am interested in both where a student is at the current moment as well as making a guess about where they may be in a year or two or three. Perfect records in high school don't always suggest perfect students in college. A student who had a bump along the way may know more about how and why they learn than one who has been grinding along without a second thought. Glowing references, strong tested ability, leadership strength and a terrific interview can sometimes outweigh a transcript with a glitch or two but in highly selective environments are not likely to override a real mess of a record.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: Weaker transcripts face tough sledding in a highly selective college environment. They don't automatically disqualify a candidate for us, but you have to remember that we have many thousands of applicants with extremely strong transcripts who are also just as exemplary in the other ways that count.

Q.

I'm a junior in New Jersey, and I feel I'm a pretty good student. Recently, a college guidance counselor emphasized that doing community service is essential, not just for the common good, but also for college admissions. How valid is this claim? Also for competitive colleges, or just colleges in general, how highly do admission officers value honors classes or AP courses (regardless of the colleges credit policy for APs)?
-Akiva L.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: If there are honors and AP courses available, many of us would look to see them represented in the record. We are looking for course loads that suggest a level of rigor more comparable to college work. Sometimes the more interesting class or teacher may not be teaching in the honors or AP program. Tell us why you made the course choices you did and you may convince us, too.

Anticipate the questions we are likely to ask. Lay out all the pieces you know will be part of the application that you can control (essays, activities and their presentation); make some guesses about what your recommenders will say; and emphasize and then address (before we ask) those things that may not show you in the best light and tell us what you learned that may not be reflected in the record.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We neither privilege nor ignore community service. The thing we are looking for outside the classroom is not a series of check boxes on a resume; we're looking instead for a high level of engagement or leadership in whatever it is that the student cares about most. For some students, community service is at the forefront of their extracurriculars, in which case we pay a lot of attention to what they have accomplished in that area. For other students, some other passion or interest holds primary sway, and we evaluate the engagement in that area. We know that very few students can fully engage more than one or two primary activities at a high level. Though it is fine for a student to have varied interests, a significant number of students make the common mistake of spreading themselves too thinly in a resume-building exercise.

With respect to programs of study, we are less concerned with particular course designations and more concerned simply to see that candidates have embraced and performed well in whatever their schools offer as a most challenging program. At the same time, we are not particularly drawn to one-dimensional students who have made their sole or primary objective in life amassing the largest number of honors or AP courses conceivable, accompanied by multiple efforts to achieve the world's highest test scores.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: We seek students who have taken good advantage of their opportunities by following their passions as well as exploring new opportunities. Because of our academic rigor, though, it is important to us that students have challenged themselves academically, which probably means taking advantage of some AP classes if they are available, but does not mean taking every AP class just because it is available.

Q.

Do you evaluate students from public and private schools differently? Does a student from a well-known private school automatically have a leg up?
-Elizabeth

Q.

Is the quality of an applicant's high school taken into consideration?
-Matthew

Q.

We live in rural Wyoming where class offerings are limited because schools cannot afford to pay teachers to teach AP classes for five kids. What advice do you have for students in rural communities who are extremely bright and motivated but do not have access to the same course selections as students in urban and suburban areas? Is there any possibility for them to apply to elite schools?
-Sherrill Hudson

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: A well-known private school student does not automatically have a leg up everywhere. Sometimes private schools have more grade inflation than the nearby public schools. Sometimes the students at the public or parochial school had to work harder to gain resources or opportunities that were more typically available at the independent school.

Context matters in the consideration of an applicant. Even within New York City or Los Angeles, there are vastly different opportunities available to students depending on the school they attend or the resources their family may have. 4-H commitments in a rural community may be as stunning a leadership signal as volunteer work in a New York City museum.

I think many applicants and their parents would be surprised to learn about the high school origins of most admissions deans and officers, even at the most selective colleges and universities. Those alma maters are overwhelmingly public schools and often are not public schools that appear on “top 10” lists.

I would urge The New York Times to poll admissions deans about where they attended high school and whether it was public, private, parochial, rural, urban, suburban, well-supported or under-funded.

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: To ask if the quality of an applicant’s high school is taken into consideration in the admission process is a little like asking if attractiveness is taken into consideration in a beauty contest. Though we try not to rely so heavily on the school that a student attended, the benefits of good schooling shows up in so many ways that it would be less than honest to say that the school one attended doesn’t matter. The goal is to not let the name of the school blind you the individual qualities of the student.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: We recognize that there are differences in high schools, although it isn’t necessarily just a public-private distinction. There are both strong and weak public and private schools. In terms of academic rigor and opportunity, there are some public schools that can match even the best private school. We recognize that an ‘A’ at one school may indicate a different level of achievement and experience than an ‘A’ at another school, or even in another class. High schools send us profiles that help us to understand their particular environment. Grades are not just taken at face value; they too are context-based.

We have high regard for students who are clearly motivated and have seized available opportunities to challenge themselves within their school, even if the school’s offerings are more limited. If there were a test for motivation, time-management skills, and study-skills, I would take it over any standardized test we have available. To some extent, that’s what a transcript provides.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We are always looking for students who excel in context, and we are acutely aware that context and access to resources vary widely (and wildly) across schools. Every year we get the other side of this question from those at private schools; if I had only gone to a public school in a less populated state, would I have stood out more and been treated more favorably? It is important to keep your eye on the bigger picture. If you are a high-achieving student in whatever context your circumstances have placed you, a number of strong colleges are going to be vying for you as a student. And again, ultimately it matters far less which strong college admits you than it matters what you do with your opportunities once you arrive there.

Q.

Do they anticipate discounting more heavily as the economy worsens? Or do they hope to buck the trend among other luxury products?
-JG

Q.

Will the financial crisis affect your university's financial aid policy? Will you put more weight on an applicant's financial condition when considering his or her application for admission?
-Jason Bourne

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: Pomona remains completely committed to financial aid support for our students and will remain need-blind in our consideration of applicants. We will continue to meet fully the demonstrated need of our admitted students who enroll, and we will continue to do so for the duration of their enrollment. We will do so without expecting students to assume any loan burden as part of our financial aid packages. There are a handful of colleges with similar plans and aspirations though there are many others that have financial resource challenges and may not yet know what they can afford to do next year. I have heard no outright reports of colleges cutting aid, but we do know that loan challenges will surface for some families.

I would reemphasize the importance of students and their families respecting deadlines for aid applications because the clearest way many colleges may have to control growing pressure on financial aid budgets may be to stick to those deadlines. Increasing numbers of students in recent years have delayed filing financial aid applications, sometimes because of costs and sometimes because of the paperwork. They have waited until after an offer of admission was extended. This delays getting an aid package and this year, could result in outright denial of support even for students who have need. Don't dawdle in filing!

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: The downturn has forced us to look even more seriously at our expenditures and to identify areas in which we can significantly reduce them, but at Lawrence, there is a commitment to protecting the academic and artistic integrity of the institution. So, we have not eliminated plans to fill our current faculty vacancies nor are there any plans to cut our financial aid budget.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: A family's ability to pay for a Yale education has no effect on our admission decision, and this has been true for over 40 years. Further, our president and trustees have made their first priority sustaining Yale's quite extraordinary financial aid programs. We actively recruit lower-income students to come to Yale, and this is not changing with the economic situation.

Q.

There is a lot of controversy about using tests like the SAT and ACT in the admissions process, and some top schools don't even use the scores. Other schools intend to deemphasize these tests in the admissions process in the future. Some studies have shown these tests not only to be biased against students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds but also to be a poor prediction of college success. How much do these tests really figure in the admissions process and how can you give talented poor kids a chance when so much emphasis is placed on the tests?
-Scott

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: Lawrence University made the decision to go test-optional. Students who believe their ACT or SAT scores are consistent with the rest of their academic record and will represent them well in the admission process are welcome to submit their scores, whereas those who believe their test scores do not appropriately represent their academic capabilities may choose not to submit them.

In 2004, Bates College reported on 20 years as a test-optional college. They had collected SAT scores from non-submitters who ultimately enrolled and determined that, in spite of having SATs that were 160 points lower, the "non-submitters" graduated from Bates and achieved GPAs that were virtually identical to those of the "submitters." You can read their fascinating study here.

The NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling) Commission on the Use of Standardized Testing in Undergraduate Admissions recently released a report that is critical of the sometimes outright misuse and the overemphasis currently placed on these tests by our society. The entire report is available here. Additional good information is available at fairtest.org.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: Colleges have a variety of testing requirements because they have found different parts of the application correlate best with success at that individual institution. Even the most selective colleges and universities use standardized tests thoughtfully and understand that they should be used in context, not as a stand-alone indicator. Grades matter. References matter. For some, test scores correlate perfectly with the rest of the application. For some, they may make little sense.

The weight assigned to test scores may vary within a college, too. A student from a comfortable background who had test prep courses and attended very strong schools may be expected to present stronger tests than a student who had fewer resources and no test prep. The dials are adjusted for all sorts of things in an application, including testing.

I urge students to look at graduation rates as one signal. Not just crude overall rates, but at graduation rates for students like themselves. Do financial aid students graduate at comparable rates to non-aided students? Do Latino students graduate at a rate comparable to the overall student body? Do students of African descent? Do student graduation rates vary by geographic origin? Do graduation rates vary much by the SAT or ACT score of enrolled students? All of this will signal that the colleges are fulfilling their commitments and are admitting students appropriately for that institution.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: We know that test scores correlate highly with socioeconomic circumstances and school resources, so we do not penalize students with fewer advantages who also have somewhat lower test scores.

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: For some colleges, SAT or ACT results are not useful because nearly everyone is admitted anyway. For others, the test results have become less useful because all students have about the same test score and therefore the tests have lost all power to discriminate. And for others still, the test scores are useful as one piece of information but not the only piece that separates students from one another. If used honestly, the tests should only carry the amount of weight that is appropriate to make important distinctions among applicants that can't be made more accurately in some other way.

Q.

To Mr. Brenzel of Yale: What is the purpose of deferring 2,644 students in this year's round of applications? You say that the deferred student will be reevaluated in the regular application process, but seeing as your freshmen class this year had 1,892 students, there is no possible way that most of these applicants stand a chance of being accepted in addition to the 742 accepted early and the regular applicant pool yet to come.

Why do you prolong the misery?
— Alexander

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: This question makes two false assumptions: that being deferred is a misery and that deferred candidates have relatively poor chances of admission. Though odds of admission to Yale are always long, each year we accept about the same percentage of the students deferred from the early round as we accept of the regular decision applicants. We are often looking to see how applicants perform in the first half of senior year, when many students are taking their most challenging schedules or seeing their primary activities outside the classroom bear fruit. At the same time, we do try very hard to give final decisions to as many students as possible, where we feel certain that we will simply not be able to offer admission in the spring. This year we let over 2,100 students know that we were closing our consideration of their applications, about 38% of our early candidates. Virtually all of these applicants were very strong students, who are going to attend great colleges and have great success. We only chose not to defer them so that they could focus wholeheartedly on their other applications.

Q.

For Mr. Walker: How has the controversial Texas "top 10 percent rule" — which guarantees admission to state universities for the top 10 percent of all high school graduates —affected the quality of the students admitted at Texas, and what is the retention rate from the freshman to sophomore year? Thank you.
— A. Alaniz

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: The disparities between the have and have-not public high schools that produce the top 10 percent students is cause for concern. Their preparation for study at a large, selective flag-ship is uneven given that they come from all high schools in the state.
Having said that, we have studied top 10 percent students since the law was passed in 1997. We have posted the annual results of our study on our Admission Research Web site for 10 years. What we have learned is: 1) As measured by freshman year GPA, top 10 percent students out-perform not-top 10 percent students. This has been without exception for 10 years. 2) Within the top 10 percent group, GPA goes up with increases in SAT scores. In other words, when we control for rank in class, SAT scores do matter as an indicator of freshman academic performance. 3) The superior performance of top 10 percent students extends across all majors. 4) Retention rates are highest among top 10 percent students. Visit our Web site for more information.

Questions from Times editors:

Q.

What part of the admissions process is most misunderstood?

A.

Jeff Brenzel of Yale University: It is not well understood that we are not aiming to pick out the best candidate in a particular school or from a particular area, as measured by some predetermined criteria. Rather, we are trying to assemble the most varied and most interesting class we can from an extremely diverse group of close to 25,000 outstanding applicants. We do not aim to compare a student primarily with other students from his or her school; we look instead for students who will bring something of particular value to the entering class.

Second, few people seem to grasp the weight given to various aspects of the application, though this can vary considerably by institution. For us at Yale, for instance, standardized test scores generally do little to differentiate applicants, because virtually all our applicants score very well. Most important to us are the transcript and the school and teacher recommendations, which students can do little to influence once it comes time for an application. We also look closely to see where and how a student has developed talents or engaged the school or community outside the classroom. Essays and interviews round out an application, and we look here mostly to see whether they convey information that enlarges or enhances, while remaining consistent with what we hear from counselors and teachers.

A.

Bruce Poch of Pomona College: Most of it!

As I read admissions-related Web sites and blogs, I am often struck by the mistaken and sometimes troublesome counsel about what matters. Sometimes that advice comes from counselors, sometimes from parents of other students and sometimes from peers rather than from the individual college. Some of that bad counsel relates to questions about what to report or what to conceal.

Grades and scores, the core if not sole basis of decisions at some institutions, may be a much smaller part of an ultimate decision for students applying to a very highly selective institution where most applicants clearly enough “can do the work.” Why students chose a particular course of study may matter a great deal to an admissions officer. How they approach a classroom or learning environment may mean more than just the letter grade received in a class.

Students should objectively look at what they have submitted and ask themselves if questions remain unanswered for a reader of that application. Do the essays reflect ideas and personality or just present a report of involvement? Does it sound like the student wrote the essay? Was a change of schools midyear explained or left to the wild imagination of an admissions officer who may read an unanswered question as a signal of danger? Why was a particular extracurricular activity the most important involvement?

A.

Bruce Walker of the University of Texas at Austin: The most misunderstood part of the process is that colleges have different missions and goals when selecting a class, and that an acceptance or denial will likely be for different reasons across multiple colleges.

A.

Steven Syverson of Lawrence University: We all have our own institutionally idiosyncratic ways of making admission decisions. But the common perception tends to be that all colleges are difficult to get into. The reality is that nearly 90 percent of America’s four-year colleges admit more than half their applicants, and with the exception of students who apply only to hyper-selective institutions, most applicants are admitted to one or more of their top choices.

Another misconception is that colleges admit students from the top down, academically, and stop when they have filled their class. The academically outstanding applicants will likely be offered admission, but a substantial portion of the class will be filled with students who are academically qualified, but also have some other characteristic that is attractive to the college (e.g., athletic or musical talent, a parent who attended the college, or a personal or cultural background that is unusual at the college).

And, when a student is denied admission to a college, there is often the presumption that they were not qualified. At highly selective colleges, the reality is that many (perhaps most?) of the denied applicants meet

the academic standards for admission, but were not offered admission simply because there was not sufficient capacity to accommodate all academically qualified candidates.

Q.

Given that colleges need to admit a certain balance of athletes, legacies, artists, musicians and development-office selections, is it reasonable for people to expect the process to be fair?

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: This really depends upon what is defined as fair. Colleges don't admit all their students just based upon their academic prowess. Each college strives to enroll a class that meets a number of objectives for the college — provide enough athletes to have competitive teams, provide enough musicians who play the right instruments to round out the needs of the orchestra, maintain good relations with alumni donors by enrolling their children, etc. These needs and objectives vary by college and by year. If this year we really need a bassoonist for the orchestra and a point guard for the basketball team, then bassoonists and point guards have an advantage. If next year we need a baseball pitcher and a violist, but have plenty of point guards and bassoonists, then bassoonists and point guards no longer have an advantage. It can be argued that it would be unfair to other members of the orchestra if the admissions office did not enroll a qualified bassoonist if they had the opportunity to do so.

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: We try to keep the process fair but you have identified some situations where the public believes the process is not fair. This is an extension of the question about what part of the admissions process is most misunderstood.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: Every college aims at putting together a diverse and interesting class, and colleges differ greatly in their institutional priorities. Accomplished students with high aspirations will find a welcome at a broad range and a large number of excellent colleges. Further, it matters far less exactly which of those colleges they attend than it matters how prepared they are to engage the world of opportunities available at any strong college. The fairness issue that concerns me most is not whether well-prepared students will be admitted into good colleges. In this country, they will. The real fairness question is whether poor students have anything like an equal chance to obtain good preparation for college, not to mention access to a means for bearing the cost.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: I reject the conclusion that some of the things on this list are quantifiable or even a "given." At some institutions, legacy interests are specifically excluded from consideration. At some, "development-office selections" do not exist (at Pomona, for example!). At some, coaches get their picks and let the admissions offices know whom to take, and at others, the coach may simply communicate interest in an athlete but will have no direct control over the choices made by the admissions officers.

I know of no place with a specific quota on legacies, artists, musicians or any of the categories listed. In a larger university with a Division I athletic program, typically the size of the institution translates into the athlete entering without displacing the possibility of another student enrolling.

Q.

How has the recession affected the admissions process and the availability of financial aid?

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: This remains to be seen and there are crosscurrents and contradictory stories coming from across the country and which vary from public to private and large to small institutions. Many colleges are writing to alumni and friends reporting new assumptions for budget planning. Many apparently will freeze hiring or hold salaries to a current level or expect only very modest salary changes. Most conversations I have been privy to reflect serious concern about maintaining student access to their institutions and universities to students across the economic spectrum, whether those institutions are large or small, private or public, well endowed or more modestly endowed. Some colleges made very significant commitments to loan-free aid programs, which are being maintained this year. Many will work to ensure the continuing availability of aid even if other areas of the budget may have to be constrained.

I hope not to hear about colleges cutting need-based aid while preserving merit aid, but acknowledge that's a personal bias, and that some may see this as a survival tool.

What does worry me is some early reporting of smaller numbers of middle- and low-income students submitting applications or submitting aid applications. I do think it will be critically important for students to submit their aid applications before deadlines this year and NOT wait until after an admission offer has been extended. In a year many colleges and universities experiencing a budget crunch, there may be nothing left at the end of an admissions cycle to actually meet their need if it has already been fully committed to those who got things in on time.

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: We are seeing higher numbers of applicants to public universities than in past years. We will not know the real impact of the recession until families have to pay a deposit and commit to a known cost.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: The support that colleges receive from their endowments is likely to decrease because the values of their endowments have dropped. This may cause some colleges to reduce the level of funding they can provide for financial aid. Other colleges may maintain their commitment to financial aid, or even increase it to assist those families who are in distress. Although it might be difficult to increase the commitment to financial aid at this time, it might be even more problematic for a college to lose enrollment. I suspect that families who can pay the full cost of education will be even more attractive to colleges now than in the past.

There are a number of plausible—and perhaps competing—impacts of these financial uncertainties. For example, it is probably prudent for private colleges (at least) to anticipate a drop in their yield rates, which will mean they need to offer admission to a larger number of students to fill their class. At the same time, some of the private colleges, particularly less selective ones, may see an increase in applications and enrollments as a result of public institutions reducing their enrollments of new students due to cuts in funding from their states. It is likely that we will see an increase in the number of students enrolling at community colleges, though at least one state is discussing reducing its community college enrollment. Typically when the economy is bad, the number of students enrolling in college actually increases because there aren't many jobs available. It is very likely that graduate school enrollments will increase for the same reason. And colleges that offer programs to retrain workers who have been displaced from their jobs are likely to see demand for those programs burgeon.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: Thankfully, it has not affected us at Yale, and President Richard Levin has just reaffirmed in an open letter to the Yale community that preserving our extraordinary financial aid initiatives is our first priority for the immediate future.

Q.

In an environment where so many applicants have good grades and test scores, what's the most innovative thing an applicant has done to be appealingly memorable?

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: Students are being told (my perception that it is mostly by hired counselors) that they need to do something to stand out in the applicant pool. Clever promotional gimmicks will be talked about around the office but seldom, if ever, will the clever promotional gimmick be why a student gets admitted. The best self-promotion is to be an outstanding student.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: What works best is what best and most fully and consistently represents the applicant. Tricks that don't fit the person end up looking like gimmicks, without real substance. The student who years ago sent in a life-size doll who was her "best friend," equipped with a recorded endorsement of the applicant, left the admissions staff feeling like it was in a Twilight Zone episode. Creepy. Don't send brownies, T-shirts or love notes. Just write a good application, choose recommenders well, write a thoughtful, personality-infused essay and if an interview is offered, do it.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: I resist answering this question directly, because many of us are striving to help make the college search and admission process less stressful for students. Every year the media publish some amusing stories about unusual strategies employed by individual applicants, but I fear this prompts more students to believe that doing some bizarre thing is an appropriate strategy to gain admission to their favored college. We should avoid encouraging that behavior.

A.

Jeff Brenzel of Yale University: We're much less interested in innovative applications than we are in innovative students, who have shown over time the spark of real intellectual curiosity and a real enthusiasm for engaging with peers, schools and communities.

Q.

How have you seen applicants shoot themselves in the foot?

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: Few of our applicants shoot themselves in the foot. What concerns me more are the number of high achieving students whose lives are governed by what they, or perhaps more often their parents, imagine is going to improve in some slight way their chances of admission to this or that particular

school. Exploration and growth serve a student best for the long run, both in education and life, not the construction of a perfect resume. We try as best we can to distinguish the one from the other.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: It is reasonably common for students to try to impress us with how much they love our particular college, by incorporating a mention of our college into their essay. (For example: “For the past four years, every time I was ready to give up on math, the thought of gaining admission to Lawrence University inspired me to redouble my efforts.”) But it is also a not-infrequent experience for them to forget to replace all the mentions of some other college in their essay. Though I doubt that many students are denied admission over such a faux pas, the current ability to “cut and paste” so easily can sometimes come back to haunt students.

It is also particularly imprudent to plagiarize an application essay.

But the most frequent form of self-inflicted damage is careless preparation of the application. In the days of handwritten applications, it might have been poor handwriting. Currently it is simply that they waited until the deadline to finish their essay and complete the remainder of their application, so they are hurried and don’t proofread carefully. A poorly presented application can, in fact, have a negative affect on the admission decision.

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: By creating inconsistencies within the application file. When students attempt to make themselves sound better than they are, the admission officer has to wonder where else the student has stretched the truth.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: See my answer to the previous question!

Q.

Do you have any way of getting beyond the persona that a student presents, on paper or in an interview?

A.

Mr. Walker of Texas: A public flagship university with a large applicant pool, and limited time, rarely has the opportunity to get beyond the surface with an applicant’s persona. But there will be opportunities for getting to know the student better, such as scholarship competitions, on campus interviews, etc., that can help with this problem.

A.

Mr. Brenzel of Yale: All aspects of the application say something to us. We try to add those things together to see whether we can picture a real, living person, with interesting talents and authentic interests. The information we have is imperfect, our judgments are imperfect, and the time we can spend on evaluation is short. But the process works well enough in general that the great majority of talented, hard-working students find a college where they can thrive.

A.

Mr. Poch of Pomona: A complete application really does reveal a pretty full picture which does penetrate a manufactured persona. If teachers describe what a student is like in their classroom rather than just reporting the grade the student received, we may well get a glimpse into a student's learning style or how they have used and contributed to a classroom. If a student provides a multi-page resume of activities and the teachers barely mention any of the leadership claimed in the activity roster, surely that may raise a question about actual involvement. Transcript performance will be reflected in teacher comments, too. Interviews likely will pick up on themes in the application and may amplify "why" a student has chosen some paths rather than just repeating "what" is on the list. It should all come together.

A.

Mr. Syverson of Lawrence: We do get beyond the persona that a student presents, but we're not interested in digging into Facebook to do so.

- Previous Post Q & A: The Neediest Cases, Ask an Expert
- Next Post Q. and A.: Obama's Housing Rescue Plan and You

From 1 to 25 of 225 Comments

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1. 1. December 17, 2008 4:51 pm Link

   Are they kidding about "development-office selections"?
   How do the children of senators, ambassadors and big shots get into to the top-notch schools? Please don't insult the intelligence of common americans!

   — *Curious Parent*
2. 2. December 17, 2008 5:02 pm Link

   What advice can you offer a 51-year-old who was recently downsized after 25 years in the newspaper / publishing / printing world, and who would like to return to college for her first degree in something totally unrelated to her work experience? (iI's been, ahem, more than 20 years for many of the credits already accumulated. There are new elements on the periodic table since I took college chemistry. Ouch.) Oh, and there will need to be financial aid to pay for school too …

   — *slant_6_mind*
3. 3. December 17, 2008 5:03 pm Link

"Thankfully, it has not affected us at Yale"

How about the $6 Billion?

— *keith*

4. 4. December 17, 2008 5:05 pm Link

Given the rowing competitiveness of applicants, how do you encourage students to spend their summers? Are professional work experience or programs abroad viewed positively or can some become too gimmicky?

— *Evan*

5. 5. December 17, 2008 5:08 pm Link

How much of a break do student athletes get with regards to academic requirements during the admissions process.

— *College Student*

6. 6. December 17, 2008 5:08 pm Link

not to early to begin thinking of these things

— *Martine*

7. 7. December 17, 2008 5:09 pm Link

Do you evaluate students from public and private schools differently? Does a student from a well known private school automatically have a leg up?

— *Elizabeth*

8. 8. December 17, 2008 5:11 pm Link

I'm interested to know, what with the reports of tens of thousands of applicants competing for a limited number of places in a class (at least at some of the colleges), and with a few over-worked admissions officers reading those applications under a deadline, how is each applicant fairly assessed? Just how much time is spent on each application?

— *Rachel C*

9. 9. December 17, 2008 5:15 pm Link

This whole interview is a terribly sad commentary on the lunacy that top-school admission has become. The kids turn themselves into stressed-out trained monkeys; the parents are worse; and the amount of time and fear devoted to this process is tragic.

All the interviewed would be doing us a favor if they stuck to the first part of their assertion (we have tens of thousands of great kids applying; they can all do the work) and then flipped coins. These attempts at engineering university classes are doomed anyway; you may as well just get a thousand interested, bright kids in there, and see what they make of the time.

— *amy*

10. 10. December 17, 2008 5:16 pm Link

slant_6_mind:

You should apply to the School of General Studies at Columbia University, a program catered to "non-traditional" students.

http://www.gs.columbia.edu/

— *Columbia Student*

11. 11. December 17, 2008 5:18 pm Link

    What procedures do you have in place to measure the fairness of your process?

    What kind of folowup do you do on your decisions?

    In what circumstances would you consider one of your decisions to be a failure?

    — *margaret heisel*

12. 12. December 17, 2008 5:19 pm Link

    Oh, slant_6, just go to a decent state school. There's absolutely no reason to pay the kind of money that the private schools charge; the PhD glut means there's good people everywhere. If you've got freedom to move, check out some of the midwestern or western state schools, where you don't get that clutchiness about state v. private status anyway.

    — *amy*

13. 13. December 17, 2008 5:26 pm Link

    I for one am sick of "alumni" kids getting the leg up on getting into these colleges. They take a certain number of slots, then the rest is split between private/ prep school applicants and the minute number of public school applicants.

    — *DAS.*

14. 14. December 17, 2008 5:30 pm Link

    Curious Parent:

    Perhaps the children of these "ambassadors, senators and big shots" are actually quite talented in their own right.

    — *Michael K.*

15. 15. December 17, 2008 5:33 pm Link

    Students who are athletes, bassoonist, artists etc
    have a special talent. But what talent does a legacy have? It's affirmative action for the privileged. College admissions people always hide behind the excuse that legacy only counts when all else is equal. No 2 students can ever be "equal" and why should the legacy be admitted in such a case? That is not equality. The tie breaker should be picked out of a hat.
    If the aim of legacy is to ensure continued family support, why not just auction off a few spots to the highest bidder? it would be more honest.

    — *Talent*

16. 16. December 17, 2008 5:35 pm Link

    I'm a graduate student at Yale who teaches undergrads, and I can attest to the sheer drive, ambition, and intelligence of the undergrad population at large. What continuously bothers myself and my colleagues is the copious amount of privilege and sense of entitlement among them—Yale has always, and will always, admit an elite student population. I accept this. But it is unfortunate at how easy it is in any given section I have taught to spot the kids (and there are usually more than a few) who went to Deerfield Academy, Horace Mann, Harvard Westlake, etc etc. Insider culture is alive and present, but no matter, while such students may be smart, and articulate, they are never the most creative, imaginative, or talented. I have come to believe that the intelligence I admire is scrappy, and can only

come from some sort of lack or need. It it were up to me, I'd always choose the shy public school kid that still thinks squash is a vegetable.

— *JS*

17. 17. December 17, 2008 5:36 pm Link

    This always seems to be a very mealy-mouthed business. Given that their pricing is deliberately opaque, one question that the heads of sales here could helpfully answer is, Do they anticipate discounting more heavily as the economy worsens? Or do they hope to buck the trend among other luxury products (with which they've worked so hard to position themselves)?

    — *JG*

18. 18. December 17, 2008 5:37 pm Link

    is college education a right of every willing student in US? If answer is yes who should pay?

    — *manohar jagalur*

19. 19. December 17, 2008 5:39 pm Link

    Is the "quality" of an applicant's high school taken into consideration?

    For example, assume two hypothetical applicants (we'll call them Abe and Bob) with the same GPA, identical SAT scores, materially identical extracurricular activities/community involvement, and an interest in pursuing the same course of study, apply to the same university. Both also happen to be non-minority students.

    Neither student qualifies as "low income" per se, but Abe's family is much higher up on the economic ladder than Bob's. Abe lives in a more expensive town, with a very good public school system whose high school is often ranked as one of the "best" high schools in the state.

    The school district in the town where Bob's family lives is consistently ranked much lower in the state, even to the point of being registered as "in need of improvement" under No Child Left Behind. Average SAT scores at Bob's high school are substantially lower than those at Abe's school.

    Other than those identified in this hypothetical question, assume no other material differences in the circumstances of Abe and Bob.

    The University receives applications from Abe and Bob (again, with materially identical grades, SAT scores, extracurricular activities, and planned course of study). Does the University consider Abe's application stronger than Bob's? Is Abe more likely than Bob to be accepted at University?

    — *Matthew*

20. 20. December 17, 2008 5:40 pm Link

    It has long been understood that there are five main facets of an application:
    Transcript, Recommendations, Standardized Test Scores, Extracurriculars, and Essays.

    If a student's transcript is in the weaker half of the applicant pool, but the remaining four facets are quite exemplary, will an elite college be willing to take a chance?

    — *Jonah*

21. 21. December 17, 2008 5:42 pm Link

    For Mr. Walker,

How has the controversial Texas “top 10 % rule” affected the quality of the students admitted at Texas, and what is the retention rate from the freshman to sophomore year?

Thank you.

— *A. Alaniz*

22. 22. December 17, 2008 5:43 pm Link

Daniel Golden’s excellent book does make the point that schools get money regardless of development admits. But, like most newspaper journalists who don’t understand economics, he fails to investigate the effects statistically. If you can get $100 million out of the generosity of people’s hearts, and $200 million by getting their kid a place in your freshman class, are you going to listen to Daniel Golden and take the $100 million?

At schools where development admits provide a large chunk of the funding, excluding them may be fairer in the absolute sense, even if they seem unfair in the relative sense (“That guy with a 1200 SAT got in, and my daughter with a 1400 SAT didn’t). If one development admit brings in enough money to pay for two regular admits, then “regular” kids come out ahead because of the kid whose great-great-grandfather went there.

— *Tom*

23. 23. December 17, 2008 5:43 pm Link

Would you advise a student who has stood out in a particular humanities subject and intends to major in that subject to send a professor in that field a very good paper that he/she wrote?
If the professor reads it and provides the officers with a good opinion of the student’s written work, will it play a role in the decision?

— *Jonah*

24. 24. December 17, 2008 5:44 pm Link

My daughter just took the ACT and scored a 27 on the test. She is a ninth grader. What can I do to make sure that she will be able to attend the upper-level colleges?

— *Proud parent*

25. 25. December 17, 2008 5:45 pm Link

Why are fewer males than females applying to college?

— *Phil Leigh*

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