



... College Admissions Won't Tell You

Hiss, a retired dean of admissions at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine.

By DANIEL J. GOLDSTEIN

What would-be students need to know about the high-stakes world of the college admissions office.

1 'Not all grades are created equal.'

For the more than two million high-school seniors who intend to go to college next year, the anxious slog of filling out applications is in full swing.

And whether they'll get a thick package announcing their admission or a thin, dream-dashing one-page letter may well depend on their grade-point average. Grades account for about 75% of the typical admissions decision, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

But not all good grades are created equal: In recent years, admissions offices have given more weight to grades from designated college-prep courses—and the more exclusive the college, the more weight those grades get.

One reason colleges are getting choosier: Grade inflation. Research by the College Board, the organization that administers the SAT, shows that the average GPA for high school seniors rose from 2.64 in 1996 to 2.90 in 2006—even as SAT scores remained essentially flat. The researchers saw this as evidence that some teachers were “using grades...to reward good efforts rather than achievement.”

2 'We don't trust your essay.'

Many colleges rely on the application essay to create a fuller picture of the applicant. But in an era of helicopter parenting, colleges increasingly worry that these essays aren't written by the student.

To rule out ghostwriting, many colleges now require applicants to supply pieces of school writing that have been graded by a teacher.

“If the application essay looks like it was written by Maya Angelou and the schoolwork looks like Willy Loman's, it will raise some eyebrows,” says William

3 'We're having second thoughts about the SAT.'

For decades, the SAT has been the primary benchmark for students' ability to handle college-level work. But many critics argue that the SAT gives an unfair advantage to wealthier students who can afford test-prep classes. About 800 of the country's 2,800 four-year colleges now make the SAT optional.

A recent study endorsed by the NACAC looked at the performance of 123,000 students admitted to college between 2003 and 2010, about 30% of whom hadn't taken the SAT or its counterpart, the ACT. The study found no significant differences in college GPAs or graduation rates between those who took either test and those who didn't.

4 'Obsessing over class ranking? That's adorable.'

In 1993, more than 40% of admissions counselors viewed class rank as “considerably important,” according to the NACAC. By 2006, that figure was under 20%. These days, rank is more likely to come into play at larger colleges, where detailed “holistic” reviews of applicants aren't always possible.

5 'It pays to make nice with your teacher.'

Amid skepticism over GPAs and test scores, some admissions officers are giving more weight to recommendations from high-school teachers and counselors. Angel Perez, dean of admissions for Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., says the most useful recommendations show that the student is intellectually curious and contributes to class discussions. “We also ask ‘How does the student respond to setbacks, how does the student interact in teams?’” Mr. Perez says.

6 'We only sound exclusive.'

About 100 U.S. colleges offered admission to less than a third of their applicants in 2013, according to U.S. News & World Report. But a low admissions rate can help a college look “ex-



Michael Witte

clusive”—improving its scores in national college rankings—and admissions officers say some colleges try to manipulate that rate.

Some schools encourage high schoolers to apply, even if they have no intention of attending. Steven Syverson, a retired dean of admissions at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wis., says some colleges count incomplete applications, to increase their applications-to-acceptances ratio.

7 'Politics may determine whether you get in.'

The role of race and ethnicity has been a polarizing issue in admissions. The NACAC says that about one third of colleges and universities consider an applicant's race as a factor. At some public universities, racial admissions preferences are banned by state law, though crit-

ics have accused some schools of working around those bans.

One practice that's generally legal: “Legacy” admissions, where children of wealthy alumni or powerful lawmakers get special consideration in the application process.

8 'We'd rather admit someone who'll pay full price.'

According to the College Board, 10% of college freshmen in 2013 were from outside the U.S. One reason colleges woo these international scholars: Many of them can afford to pay full tuition.

At publicly funded state universities, higher tuition for out-of-state students often helps subsidize education for state residents. For example, for an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, in-state tuition is about \$13,000 a year; for an out-of-state or foreign

student, tuition is about \$36,000 a year.

9 'We need you more than you need us.'

After 15 years of steady growth, the number of U.S. high-school graduates leveled off this year at 3.2 million. It's expected to stay at that level until 2020, when it is expected to rise, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. That means more colleges will be chasing after fewer students.

As a result, students who get into more than one school may be able to do some horse-trading on tuition, notes Matthew Pittinsky, CEO of Parchment.com, an online college-admissions-credentials-management website. “It's just like going to the dealer and negotiating a better rate for your new car,” he says.

10 'Just because you're admitted doesn't mean you'll stay admitted.'

About 22% of colleges revoked at least one offer of admission in 2009 (the most recent year studied), according to the NACAC. The most commonly cited reasons were senioritis-impacted final grades (65%), disciplinary issues (35%) and falsification of application information (29%).

In recent years, student postings on social media have prompted some schools to reconsider their offers. Mr. Perez of Pitzer College recalls an incident in which a student Pitzer had decided to admit was found to be harassing a high-school teacher on Facebook.

“It was a difficult situation, but I pulled the admissions letter before it was printed,” Mr. Perez says.

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