



# What College-Admissions Officers Really Look For

BY JIM COLLINS

**L**AST FALL Karl Furstenberg, Dartmouth College's dean of admissions and financial aid, was sitting in his Hanover, N.H., office when a three-foot-wide cookie, decorated in the school colors of green and white, arrived from an applicant. Furstenberg wasn't surprised. Rising competition among students is making them increasingly anxious about getting into the college of their choice.

How do admissions officers like Furstenberg decide who gets in? While all of the better schools want students who are academically well-prepared, many other factors are considered. The school's desire for racial, geographic and gender diversity can play a role, as can a student's financial need. Outstanding athletes and relatives of alumni are typically given special consideration. At state schools, nonresidents usually face stiffer academic re-

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### **WHAT COLLEGE-ADMISSIONS OFFICERS REALLY LOOK FOR**

quirements than in-state students.

Applicants can, however, tip the scales in their favor. As a growing number of qualified students apply for limited openings, admissions officers are paying special attention to subjective factors: recommendations, interviews, application essays, unusual backgrounds and the caliber of courses taken in high school. And those decision-makers agree that certain intangibles give applicants a competitive advantage. Here are some of the important ones:

**Focus.** Just a few years ago, students who excelled in academics as well as extracurricular activities had a good shot at getting into leading colleges. More and more, though, good schools are attracted to those same students who are also masters of one particular area.

Matt Seto, a student from Troy, Mich., applied to Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., where students tend to focus on business. "It's not unusual for incoming students to have regularly read *The Wall Street Journal*," says Dean of Undergraduate Admissions Charles Nolan. Seto had not only read the *Journal*, he'd been written up in it—for having started his own mutual fund at age 14. Despite average grades, he was accepted.

"Of course, you don't have to run your own mutual fund to be noticed here," Nolan says. "What we like to see is entrepreneurial spirit—a student willing to take something on and see it through." This could be an enterprise as simple, he adds, as setting up a small landscaping business.

Other schools, such as Ohio's University of Akron, participate in an accelerated program for applicants with a demonstrated interest in medicine. Institutions known for certain programs—film at New York University, say, or marine science at the University of Miami—are impressed by applicants who concentrated on relevant skills in high school.

Joe Head, dean of enrollment services at Kennesaw State University near Atlanta, looks for applicants who have already worked in their fields of study. Examples include candy strippers applying to the nursing program and potential history majors working for local historical societies.

**Pluck.** Ask an admissions officer to recall a memorable application, and a surprising number describe an applicant who overcame adversity. "I read a remarkable essay written by a young person whose life had been shaped by the trauma of losing both parents in a car accident," says Shari Sterling of Prescott College in Prescott, Ariz. "I'll remember that essay for the rest of my life."

Robin Blume-Kohout made a similar impression on a Kenyon College admissions officer in Gambier, Ohio. He'd grown up in a house with no electricity or running water, but he had earned good test scores. His application essay began, "I was born in the Alaskan bush on the kitchen table." Asks Dean of Admissions John Anderson, "How can you forget an opening line like that?"

While not all students can write about severe hardship, many have

### **WHAT COLLEGE-ADMISSIONS OFFICERS REALLY LOOK FOR**

overcome something that shows character. Susan K. Unterecker, director of admissions at Swarthmore, a selective liberal-arts college in Swarthmore, Pa., was impressed by an applicant who'd devoured nearly every book in his town library, even though there wasn't a book in his house.

Champlain College in northern Vermont gives special consideration to high-school students who keep up decent grades despite helping to support a single parent or a struggling family business. "Those students may not be able to undertake the demands of an honors curriculum," says Admissions Director Jo Churchill. "But if he or she still is able to maintain a B average in a college-prep program, the student shows great promise."

*Community spirit.* Many colleges place strong emphasis on an applicant's community involvement. "We like the kind of student who has taken on some leadership role both inside and outside the high school," says Rob Baird, associate dean of admissions at Coe College, a small liberal-arts school in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

At Champlain College one student who wanted a career in criminal justice stood out. "He'd seen children in his community who were antagonistic toward law-enforcement officials," says Churchill. "He wanted to fashion a partnership between police and schools to promote after-school activities. We were happy to take him."

Sectarian schools are drawn to applicants whose spiritual faith is active. One such school is Dallas Baptist University. Says John Plotts, vice pres-

ident for enrollment, "We look for students who have made an impact on society through leadership in their school, community and church."

*Curiosity.* Jon Rivenburg, acting dean of admissions at rigorous Reed College in Portland, Ore., says he takes notice "when students ask what they can learn here, how a particular subject is taught, or why we teach that way." Such questions, he adds, show "the critical mind we hope to attract."

Curiosity can also come through in an applicant's essay—which was the case for New Hampshire high-school student Kate Porter. She applied to the honors program at the University of Delaware in Newark. "I wrote about how a friend pushing me out into a rainstorm changed my whole outlook," she says. "I realized I hadn't been taking enough chances in my life."

Porter's application landed on the desk of Louis Hirsh, the program's senior associate admissions director. "Her essay talked about the need to take risks," he says. "That dimension of intellectual curiosity best defines the kind of student we're looking for."

*Drive.* At tiny (280 students) Marlboro College in Marlboro, Vt., admissions officers look for self-starters. "Because we require much independent work, the students we try to attract reflect this," says Director of Admissions Wayne Wood. More important than grades and test scores, Wood adds, are the students' essays, recommendations and interviews.

For applicants who can't present a stellar high-school record, ambition

### **WHAT COLLEGE-ADMISSIONS OFFICERS REALLY LOOK FOR**

may be their best asset. "You can tell which students are motivated," says Tori McGuire, associate director of enrollment services at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. "They keep their appointments and have their notes organized." Little things can make a difference—even showing up well-groomed and well-dressed.

To demonstrate her enthusiasm for Cottey College in Nevada, Mo., Jessica Moyer sent in her application the June before her senior year of high school. "It was clearly my first choice," she says. "I thought it wouldn't hurt to let them know." Wendy Beckemeyer, director of enrollment management at the well-regarded two-year women's college, was impressed. Moyer was admitted.

If your child has a clear first choice for college, see if there is an early-admissions option to improve the odds of getting in. Whether a student applies early or not, remember this: outlining concrete reasons for wanting to be accepted at a given college is better than simply saying, "I'd love to attend your school."

*Personality.* "Honesty and the ability to communicate effectively are

very important to us," says Marlyn McGrath Lewis, director of admissions for Harvard and Radcliffe Colleges. Adds Teresa Duffy, dean of admissions at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., "I want kids here whom I like."

Personality can be the deciding factor between two equally qualified applicants. Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, Calif., is one of the country's most demanding science and engineering schools. "But we want students who are whole people," says Deren Finks, director of admissions. "In our interviews we ask such questions as 'How do you spend your Saturdays?'"

WHILE MOST SCHOOLS look for similar qualities in applicants, there is no sure-fire formula for getting into a particular college. With that in mind, parents and students should study college catalogues and quiz recent alumni, current students and admissions officials to learn which school would be the best "fit." And remember one more thing: admissions officers aren't always right. Harvard Business School once turned down Warren Buffett.

*Reprints of this article are available. See page 206.*

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### **Quip Pro Quo**

MY HUSBAND AND I, both research scientists, were discussing what we felt was needed to succeed in our field. We agreed that the most successful investigators were inherently aggressive and self-assured, qualities that were not my strong points. Knowing that my dietary habits did not include meat, my husband remarked, "You know what the problem is. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, and you're a vegetarian."

—Contributed by Nancy Touchette