

## Show Them You Care

*Want to get into your first choice college? E-mail that admissions officer now.*

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

For Kaavya Viswanathan, a high-school senior in Hackensack, N.J., applying to college has involved some serious schmoozing with admissions officials. After narrowing her choices to nine super-competitive colleges, including **Harvard** and **Yale** Universities, she began sending personal e-mail messages and calling admissions representatives at each institution to let them know how serious she was about attending their college.

Beginning last year, she made sure she sent messages to admissions staff members at all nine colleges at least once a month, and she is on a first-name basis with many of them.

With so much competition for spots at top colleges, she says, personal contact "gives you an edge" over students with similarly high test scores and achievements.

"I think a lot of applying to college is about strategy," says Ms. Viswanathan, who scored a near-perfect 1560 on the SAT, has a 4.16 grade-point average, and is editor in chief of a high-school online magazine. "When they read my application, maybe they'll remember me," she says.

Savvy students are learning that the majority of selective colleges favor applicants who show clear signs of interest, such as attending information sessions, visiting the campus, calling or e-mailing admissions officers, or signing in on the college's Web site.

### *Growing Practice*

Officials at 56 percent of the colleges that participated in a recent survey said they considered a student's "demonstrated interest" -- a term that has caught on as colleges began tracking applicants' contacts with colleges -- as a factor in admissions decisions. The survey, of 595 colleges, will be released this month by the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Thirty percent of respondents said demonstrated interest was of "considerable" or "moderate" importance, while 26 percent said it was of "limited" importance in their decisions. Sixteen percent of the surveyed colleges that are highly selective -- those that admit less than half of the students who apply -- said they assign "considerable importance" to demonstrated interest, and admissions officials say the practice is growing.

Colleges that use demonstrated interest routinely defer or reject stellar applicants who do not make overtures beyond filing an application, on the assumption that those students wouldn't have accepted the college's offer anyway.

Some colleges also consider demonstrated interest when deciding which students should get merit scholarships. Students are applying to so many colleges these days, some officials argue, that it is tough to know if applicants view their college as a longstanding dream or a safety school.

"You wouldn't invite people to your wedding who are strangers you found in the phone book," says Jonathan Burdick, dean of admissions and financial aid at the **University of Rochester**. "You want to invite people who know what's going on. We feel that we're really different from all these other places, and we want to make sure students are paying attention to that."

Some high-school guidance counselors criticize the use of demonstrated interest, saying it is unfair to students who might not know that they need to flirt with colleges, or who cannot afford to visit all the campuses they are interested in. "I think it's unfortunate for the kids because I think it's another burden," says A.J. Aucamp, director of college guidance at Saint Andrew's School, in Boca Raton, Fla.

In October 2002, NACAC passed a resolution asking its admissions-practices committee to consider whether the association should take a formal stand on demonstrated interest, but that review is still under way.

### *Careful Tracking*

**Emory University** is upfront with applicants about its use of demonstrated interest. Its undergraduate application begins by urging students to make contact with the college:

"We carefully note demonstrated interest during the admissions process and expect candidates to have done their homework on us: Have you met us at a college fair, ordered the Emory video visit, attended an information session, or perhaps visited campus? Most importantly, have you clearly and specifically articulated in this application why Emory is a good match for you?"

**Emory's** admissions officials use a database to record all such contacts by students, a practice common at other colleges as well, says Jean D. Jordan, director of enrollment services. "If you visit, you fill out a form," she says. "If you come to a college fair, you fill out an inquiry card and we track that. If we're at your high school [and you attend], we track that."

Ms. Jordan says the practice has improved retention and attracted a more-involved student body. "What we've found over the years," she says, "is that students who've really researched us and really know what we're all about are the students who are the happiest and the most involved."

Other college officials say a key reason to track demonstrated interest is the rise in popularity of the Common Application, a standardized form accepted by 241 colleges across the country. Nearly 50 of those colleges recently decided to waive application

fees for students who apply online using the Common Application.

That means students can fire Common Applications at colleges "like a machine gun," says Nathan Allen, an independent college counselor and the author, under the name Andrew Allen, of *College Admissions Trade Secrets* (Writers Club Press, 2001).

"The huge danger of the Common Application is you can apply everywhere and not know anything about the places," Mr. Allen says. Some students apply to 20 or more colleges, he says, though the average is closer to five or six.

### ***'Splitting the Hairs'***

The rise in multiple applications has forced colleges to find new ways to quickly distinguish among candidates.

"As seats in your class become more and more of a premium, you're splitting the hairs more and more finely to try to make decisions," says Christopher Hooker-Haring, dean of admissions and financial aid at Muhlenberg College, which accepts the Common Application but does not waive fees for online applicants. He says the college uses demonstrated interest as a "tip factor" when deciding among similar applicants.

By increasing the number of applicants, colleges raise their selectivity, making it statistically more difficult to gain acceptance. And by accepting only students who are likely to attend, colleges can increase their "yield," the number of accepted students who matriculate.

Both numbers are often viewed as signs of a college's prestige by trustees and some college guides. U.S. News & World Report recently stopped considering yield in its rankings after critics charged that colleges were crafting policies to artificially increase yield.

### ***Gaming the Process***

As students have figured out that showing interest can give them a leg up, some have gone to great lengths to play along.

Ms. Viswanathan, who attends a high school called the Academy for the Advancement of Science and Technology, says she was advised to contact admissions officials by Katherine Cohen, an independent college counselor from a New York-based counseling firm called IvyWise, whom her family hired.

She visited all nine colleges and made sure the admissions office knew she had stopped by, and she attended any information sessions held in her area by representatives from those campuses. She always asked questions at presentations and stayed afterward to introduce herself.

She says other students did the same. "There are so many people who come up and just hang around and ask questions that were covered in the presentation," she says, "and you know they're there just so they can impress the admissions officer."

Ms. Viswanathan says her efforts paid off. She just got into Harvard, her first choice and the only college she applied to early. All that communication may have been unnecessary for Harvard, however, since the act of applying early is itself the clearest indication that Harvard is the student's first choice -- the university does not allow students who apply early to file early applications to any other college.

### *Unwelcome Attention*

Not all college admissions officials welcome all the extra attention.

"I find this all a little troubling," says Bruce J. Poch, vice president and dean of admissions at **Pomona College**. He says his office routinely gets personal e-mail messages and letters from students, including one message with a picture of the applicant proudly wearing a **Pomona College** sweatshirt to show his enthusiasm.

"We're starting to get polluted in-boxes of students contacting us in almost chatty ways," Mr. Poch says. "In the end, if everybody does it, then how do you measure this so-called demonstrated interest?"

"I feel badly that kids think that they have to demean themselves," he says. "They are then supplicants not applicants. To me demonstrated interest should be an application."

### *And others question the fairness of weighing interest.*

"How unfair it is depends on how big of an advantage this is," says Christopher Avery, a professor of public policy at **Harvard University** who co-wrote *The Early Admissions Game* (Harvard University Press, 2003). He says low-income students will probably be unaware that they should make gestures of interest to colleges.

In interviews he has conducted with high-school students as part of his research, he found that students at private schools were far better informed about college admissions than were students at public schools.

But admissions officials who look at demonstrated interest say they take into account a student's background when making judgments. Applicants living far away are not expected to visit, for instance, especially if it would be a financial burden to do so.

### *On the Waiting List*

"We try to be fair in the review and recognize that not everyone has the means or opportunity or know-how to think that that's a good idea," says Katie M. Madden, associate dean of admissions at **Bates College**.

And if admissions officers are not sure of the interest level of a highly qualified applicant, they often defer a student rather than reject him or her outright, she says.

"If they remain on our wait list then they have a great shot of getting in later," says Ms. Madden. "If they really want to come to **Bates**, then they'll stay on the wait list." Of course, there's always the risk that such students would feel snubbed and choose to go elsewhere, says Ms. Madden.

But that's a risk the college can afford to take, especially since it has no shortage of qualified students: Only about one in four students who apply to **Bates** gets in.

### ***WHAT COLLEGES LOOK FOR***

The latest annual survey of admissions officials conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling was the first to ask if officials consider the "demonstrated interest" of applicants--such as if the student visited or contacted the admissions office--as a factor in their decisions. The chart\*\* below shows the percentage of colleges where certain factors played a moderate to considerable role.

### ***INTEREST AND SELECTIVITY***

Highly selective colleges assign more importance to demonstrated interest than do others.

### **SOURCE: 2003 NACAC Admissions Trends Survey**

- \*\*If interested, please contact Eric at *Programs for Education* for the information on that chart. Could not transfer it to this letter. (978) 582-0273

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