

COLLEGE BOUND

Finding the right fit for academics and lifestyle

BY SCOTT DRISCOLL

I REALLY APPRECIATE MY PARENTS' sacrifice," says Octavio Viramontes. "I only wish they could have experienced what I will experience." Until last month, 18-year-old Viramontes—a 2011 graduate of Delano High School—lived in Earlimart, about two hours north of Los Angeles in California's central valley. But he's now embarking on his first month of studies as a freshman at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Viramontes' acceptance to Harvard is the latest in a long line of achievements: He graduated first in his class, earned straight A's and has taken home trophies from math and engineering competitions. His admission to the Ivy League school is all the more impressive given the selectivity of the nation's top universities. Harvard accepted a record-low 6.17 percent of an unprecedented 34,950 applicants for its incoming 2011 freshman class. The acceptance rates this year at other highly selective private schools are also daunting—for example, Stanford, 7.1 percent; Brown, 8.7 percent; and MIT, 9.7 percent.

"Acceptance into college these days is just not as predictable as it used to be," observes Joyce Smith, CEO of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Except for a few years in which there were slight dips, undergraduate enrollment has been on the rise since 1970, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. This is partly due to population growth, and partly due to increased interest in applying to college, especially among children from low-income families. Schools are also recruiting more widely.

At the same time, teens are sending applications to more colleges than ever before. According to a November 2010 report by NACAC, public and private not-for-profit four-year institutions experienced overall growth in applications of 47 and 70 percent, respectively, between 2001 and 2008.

While it's true that more students are vying for fewer undergraduate spaces, the majority of anxious college-bound teens and their parents can take heart: There are numerous choices—more than 4,000 degree-granting colleges and universities (including two-year institutions)—available in the United States. And according to the most recent "State of College Admission" report released by NACAC, the average selectivity rate (percentage of applicants who were offered admission) at U.S. four-year colleges and universities was 67 percent for fall 2009.

"There are so many great schools, here and abroad. They're out there looking for students who will be a good fit," says Bob Dannenholt, director of Seattle's Application Navigation, a company that offers independent college advising.

High school students should consider a variety of factors—from grades to curriculum to sports participation to community service to their writing samples—that can make their university applications stand out from the crowd.

And along the way, keep in mind that the college search and application process can even be fun, reminds Dannenholt. "It's such an exciting time, discovering what your life can be after high school," he says.

COLLEGE-PREP TIMELINE

There is no one-size-fits-all college-prep process, according to Alice Kleeman, college adviser for public Menlo-Atherton High School on the San Francisco Peninsula. "Most importantly," she says, "students should read a lot, be intellectually curious, take challenging classes and get involved in an activity they care about. And remember, especially as a senior, to relax and take a deep breath and enjoy the process."

Kleeman offers the following general guidelines for navigating the road to college admission.

FRESHMAN YEAR ➤ Read a lot. Take classes in your areas of strength and interest. Engage in one or two activities outside class that you really enjoy.

SOPHOMORE YEAR ➤ Take challenging classes in the five core areas: English, science, social studies, math and foreign language. Continue the one or two activities.

JUNIOR YEAR ➤ In the fall, take the PSAT, the exam to prepare for the college-entrance exams, and begin to talk to visiting college reps. Deepen involvement in activities; e.g., become a leader in a club, an editor of the school newspaper, a mentor, or a coach for younger players. In the spring, take the SAT or ACT college-entrance exam. In the spring or in the summer after junior year, begin to visit college campuses, if possible. Also in the summer, begin thinking about your college essays.

SENIOR YEAR ➤ Do not drop any of the five core classes. In the fall, repeat the SAT or ACT, if necessary. Apply to colleges—most applications come due between November and January. Apply for financial aid after the first of January, and be sure parents supply the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. Apply for scholarships. —S.D.

THE VIRAMONTES FAMILY sold their farm in Mexico and moved north to seek better opportunities for their four boys when Octavio was in fifth grade. Octavio's father did not attend school beyond sixth grade; his mother finished high school but never went to college. Mr. Viramontes works in the vineyards, picking grapes or trimming vines, and his wife joins him in the fields six months out of the year. With an annual income of about \$31,000, the Viramontes family qualifies as low-income for college financial aid. Octavio's success in overcoming



CHOOSING THE BEST COLLEGE FOR YOU

On a campus visit, it's most essential to observe a day in the life of the students there, notes Peter Osgood, director of admissions at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California. "Eat a meal with the natives to see what kinds of things they talk about or think are funny," he says. It can also be helpful to visit a class or two and pay attention to the interactions between the professors and students. And don't place too much emphasis on the guided campus tour, which can lead to a "distorted view." Pay more attention to interactions with students, he recommends.

Osgood suggests that students ponder the following questions in order to find a college that will be a good fit.

- 1 > Why do you want an education? Are you going to college to make friends? To get a good job? To become independent?
- 2 > Throughout your high school years, what have you enjoyed most? Is there anything you've missed that you'd want to do in college?
- 3 > What do you care most about? What excites you intellectually? What occupies most of your efforts or time?
- 4 > What do you like to learn when you can learn on your own? What interests and commitments do you pursue outside of class?
- 5 > What teaching methods or styles of learning are most effective for you? Group projects? Research? Lectures? Seminar discussions? Readings from texts or from other sources?
- 6 > In what ways do you contribute to your school and community? Is it likely you'll continue these roles in college, or develop new roles?
- 7 > Consider your hometown, your school, your family: How has your environment influenced your way of thinking?
- 8 > What do your parents, teachers and close friends expect of you? How have their expectations influenced your goals and the standards you set for yourself?
- 9 > How comfortable are you with, and how do you respond to, people who act or believe differently from you? What viewpoints challenge you most?
- 10 > How have you grown or changed during your high school years? How would you like to grow in college? —S.D.

challenges, in addition to his outstanding academic credentials, may be a factor in why he stood out among other strong candidates.

"Highly selective colleges look for a hook," says Bruce Bailey, who was a college counselor at Seattle's private Lakeside School for four decades and is now an independent counselor. "Many selective colleges are seeking applicants from low-income families who are the first generation to attend college." In fact, Viramontes' incoming freshman class at Harvard—made up of students from around the country and the world—may be among the most diverse in the school's history.

The fact that a wide array of students comes to the attention of selective schools can be attributed in part to the widespread use among private colleges and universities of the online "Common Application" form—a standardized form, filled out online, that can be submitted to any of the 456 participating institutions. The form, first used in 1975 by 15 private colleges, went online in 1998–99, and saw its use grow. While most public universities continue to use their own application forms, some large public schools, such as the University of Michigan, are switching to the Common Application.

Couple the ease of application with increased social and geographic mobility, notes Smith of NACAC, and you have highly capable students casting the net of their applications much wider than they ever used to.

"A generation ago, they would have applied to three colleges—one 'wish,' or 'reach,' college and two in-state 'safe' schools ["safe" meaning acceptance was likely]. Now they're applying to between 10 and 20 colleges anywhere in the country," says Bailey. Case in point: Viramontes, who applied to 20 schools and was accepted at 18.

"If the high school valedictorian who used to apply to three colleges is now applying to 15, that means selective colleges are seeing thousands more applications from the best students. It's far less certain who will get in," Bailey says.

GABRIELLA MEFFERT, A 2011 GRAD of public Menlo-Atherton High School on the San Francisco Peninsula, applied to a dozen colleges, a mix of public and private, including the University of Michigan, Boston University and the University of Washington. Despite a very respectable GPA of 3.8, Meffert was wait-listed at several of her top choices, including the UW, where she appealed and was accepted three weeks later.

"That was the worst month—the waiting, not knowing," she says.

Applications to the UW's freshman class have risen from 15,955 in 2005 to 24,539 in 2011, an increase of more than 50 percent. Yet, the number of students offered admission has gone up by just one-third in that same time period. And the GPAs in the middle 50 percent of those students who enrolled have been incrementally increasing. The UW aims

Essay Writing 101



Paul Seegert, associate director of admissions at the University of Washington, suggests the following guidelines to help take some of the mystery out of the personal statement-writing process:

- 1 Be thorough, but do not exceed suggested word lengths.
- 2 Address the topic—a personal statement written for one university will probably not work well for all.
- 3 Put your best foot forward, but with humility.
- 4 Be genuine and use your own voice—don't try to be clever or dramatic if that isn't you.
- 5 Write like it matters, not like you're texting.
- 6 Write well, but don't stress as if your life depended on it. It doesn't. —S.D.

National College Fairs

At National College Fairs (www.nationalcollegefairs.org), sponsored by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, students and parents can meet one-on-one with admissions representatives from a wide range of public and private, two-year and four-year colleges and universities to learn about admission requirements, financial aid, course offerings and campus environments. The fall fair schedule includes the following cities:

PHOENIX, AZ • October 2

LONG ISLAND, NY • October 2

MINNEAPOLIS, MN • October 4 and 5

CHICAGO, IL • October 10

ST. LOUIS, MO • October 16

WASHINGTON, DC • October 18

SEATTLE, WA • November 4 and 5

PORTLAND, OR • November 6 and 7

SPOKANE, WA • November 8

for a well-rounded class overall, made up of students with a variety of talents and achievements, says Paul Seegert, associate director of admissions at the University of Washington. Overall academics are still the most significant deciding factor. On the other hand, demonstrated leadership and achievement in an activity can make up for a lower academic performance.

“It’s true, we have more applicants and not enough space to make up the difference,” says Seegert. “But our basic advice to parents is the same: Make sure your student takes the most rigorous curriculum available in his or her school, such as honors, AP [Advanced Placement], IB [International Baccalaureate] or Running Start classes. Challenge them as much as you can—the UW likes to see three to four years of foreign language; three to four years of science, including at least two years of chemistry, biology or physics; four years of math at increasingly higher levels, ideally including precalculus or calculus; and four years of English classes that incor-

porate writing skills.”

The UW has adopted a “holistic” application-review process that allows reviewers to consider the overall context for each application, including the student’s personal story. “An admissions officer reads everything in an application file, looking for the rigor of the curriculum, the personal statements and information on activities,” Seegert says.

What stands out most to his admissions team are students who take the most challenging courses available to them; students who maintain high grades year after year, or students whose grades dramatically improve after a rough start; students who defy the odds and achieve beyond what one would expect, given the challenges noted in their personal statement; and students who pursue a passion or activity beyond what would be expected of their peers and years.

“Writing skills matter,” he adds. “A well-written personal statement or essay won’t decide the matter, but a poorly written essay can hurt an applicant’s chances.”



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Meffert chose to write about overcoming adversity in her college-application essay. After moving back to California from Chicago, the once-standout soccer player found that she'd fallen behind her peers and didn't make the team. "I had no idea what I'd do; I had no other athletic activities. I felt like I had nothing, and I had to find a way to turn that into a positive."

At a friend's suggestion, Meffert took up Ultimate Frisbee. But her school only fielded a male team, so she competed with them. "It was a struggle to match the skill level of my male teammates who had more experience," she says. Not only did Meffert improve, she ended up playing on California's Youth Team and went on to two national competitions.

"If someone says you can't do something," she wrote in her personal statement, "it should give you more motivation to prove them wrong."

COLLEGES LIKE TO SEE that a student cares deeply about something or to see involvement in an activity—such as Meffert's participation in Ultimate Frisbee—that reveals a genuine interest, according to Peter Osgood, director of admissions at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California.

Students who apply to a private college such as Harvey Mudd, Osgood admits, are not typical. Part of a consortium of five undergraduate and two graduate Claremont Colleges in Los Angeles County, Harvey Mudd admitted 20 percent of its applicants in 2011, down from 28 percent in 2007—and those numbers were drawn from a select pool. Known as a math, science and engineering college, Harvey Mudd admits students whose scores on the SAT Subject Test in Mathematics Level 2 range from 750 to 800, with 30 percent scoring a perfect 800. But in addition to having rarified math expectations, the application reviewers look for qualities similar to those sought by other public and private schools.

"We put the most weight on the quality and rigor of the student's courses," says Osgood. "We often see an average of six to eight AP courses in math and science. But

It always starts so innocently.



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that's a given. The student we'll choose will be the one who chases something down passionately outside the classroom."

For example, Harvey Mudd would take the student who, as a sophomore, built a chemistry club that became popular at the school versus the kid who formed a club in name only during senior year.

Viramontes' extracurricular activities demonstrated his well-roundedness and sense of commitment. He joined MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement), and worked on projects such as designing and building model airplanes and bridges that won awards at regional competitions. In his junior year, he became president of the school's math club. But he suspects that the way he donated his time during his senior year is what stood out on his applications. "Each Monday and Wednesday, I tutored other students in math so they could pass the California high school exit exam," he explains.

This experience also taught him a life lesson: After gleaning everything he can from the resources at Harvard, he hopes to come back to his hometown and mentor those who lack resources.

OPPORTUNITIES ALSO ABOUND for students with less stellar academic records. Dannenholt, whose educational background is in cognitive science, has worked with a broad range of students, primarily in the Pacific Northwest, including students with different learning styles or issues.

"For me, working with kids is all about getting to know them and gathering information about their strengths and how we're going to surround them with their strengths in their life after high school," he says. "Sometimes those kids who struggle with learning issues do really well in college. There, they can concentrate on things they're excited about and good at."

Reid Beloff, who graduated in 2011 with a 3.3 GPA from Bellevue High School east of Seattle, admits that he wasn't always the best student in high school. "I didn't understand how to approach education until I figured out what interested me."

In his senior year, Beloff realized that his creative mind was well suited to entre-



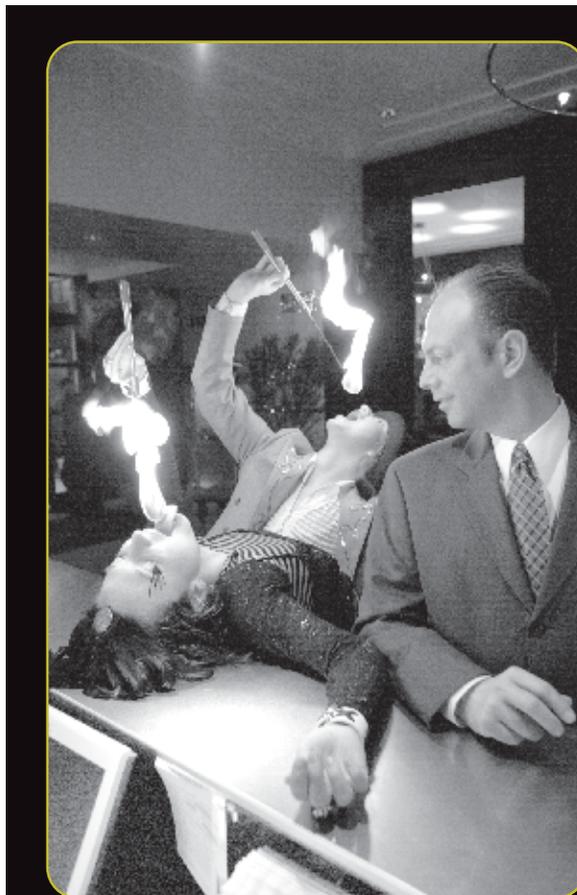
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preneurship. "I'm interested in thinking of new ideas. So every day, I look at something and try to think how it's made and how to make it differently."

When considering universities, he says, he looked for schools with a fun approach to learning. He found that approach at Oregon State University, whose Weatherford Hall dorm is focused on entrepreneurship and offers a "Garage" program that provides residents with the tools, techniques and funding to start their own businesses, while collaborating with people in the dorm.

"I'm excited to start working at my future," says Beloff, who begins his studies at OSU this month.

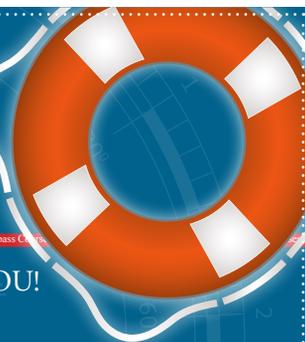
Students with around a B average—who might not be competitive at top state schools or more elite colleges—will still be competitive at many very good schools, such as midsize public universities and smaller private schools, says Seegert of the University of Washington.

Often, when kids don't have the best grades, it's because they had a bad year, explains Dannenhold. "There are so many temporary things in an adolescent's life that can upset their applectart. They can typically bounce back, but just need to explain what was happening at that time."

The college-application essay is one place to do so, as is the section on many admissions forms that asks if there is anything else the school should know about the applicant. Here, says Dannenhold, the student could write something such as, "My freshman year is not an accurate reflection of my abilities as a student. Please look at my junior year when I got my act together."

Community colleges are also a significant pathway to a four-year university for many students. According to Seegert, about one-third of all new students admitted to the University of Washington in the course of a year are transfer applicants, primarily from Washington's community colleges. This can be a particularly good option for students who didn't do well in high school and want a fresh start to show that they've matured and can prove themselves academically.

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HIGH SCHOOLS ARE, of course, where the academic foundation is laid. At Seattle's University Prep, a private middle and high school, 100 percent of the 70 seniors who graduated this year have enrolled in a four-year college. "We stress with our students that the quality of the curriculum they take matters more than GPA," notes Kelly Herrington, the school's director of college counseling. The school's core curriculum is modeled on the expectations of select West Coast colleges.

Herrington says, though, that he is less concerned with student preparedness than with overinvolved or nervous parents turning their teens into what he calls "crispies"—high schoolers whose days are so filled with soccer and violin and club activities that they're fried to a crisp by the time they reach college. "Parents need to be a lot less concerned about filling their kids' time and more concerned with allowing them to enjoy high school. Keep in perspective that most colleges still accept greater than 50 percent of their applicants," Herrington says.

"Most of all, avoid pronoun confusion," Herrington adds. "It's not 'we' who are applying to college. Your child is applying. It's a big mistake to feel validated by where your kids go to college."

Tiffany Lieu, a 2011 graduate of Seattle's Lakeside School, wonders if she overworried her preparedness. "I got the college talk in eighth grade because my parents were stressing over my older sister," says Lieu. Her sister, Christina, is currently a senior at Duke, a private university in Durham, North Carolina, which admitted only 13 percent of its applicants in 2011. "I worried a lot about grades."

In ninth grade—already thinking about how it would look on her college application—Tiffany signed up for eight classes. But not just any eight classes. "I signed up for the intensive track in math and science."

Looking back—albeit knowing she has been accepted at Duke for this fall—she speculates, "I probably stressed more than was necessary."

WHILE THERE IS MUCH EMPHASIS on how to get accepted to a university,



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students should be simultaneously conducting their own selection processes. To find the best college fit, Osgood advises students to narrow down their choices based on their preferred learning style, whether it's lecture, seminar or hands-on labs. He also suggests that parents visit a few campuses with their teens.

“During my son’s tour of campuses, he realized he’d been asking the wrong questions,” Osgood recalls. He’d been focused on the schools’ academic strengths, but he realized gauging his ability to fit in with the student population was just as important. “After doing an overnight stay at a school he ended up not applying to, he said, ‘I see this school as who I am now, but not like who I want to be.’ That was a profound moment we would have missed had we not visited the campus.”

Viramontes says he specifically chose Harvard because of a campus visit. When he was in ninth grade, an inspirational math teacher at Delano High School, Jose Maldonado, recognized Viramontes’ potential and recommended that he be one of a group of five students from the region who traveled to Boston to visit Harvard and MIT.

“During that trip, I fell in love with the Harvard campus,” Viramontes recalls. “But I especially appreciated the diverse student body at Harvard. I want to learn from those students, who I imagine will be as passionate about their goals as I am.”

Despite the stiff competition in college admission these days, college advisers are encouraging students not to rule out select schools. Sandy Baum, an independent higher-education policy analyst and senior fellow at the George Washington University School of Education in Washington, D.C., advises students to identify a range of colleges suited to their individual learning style, then apply to the very best among those for which they’re qualified. “Try, and if you get in, it will be worth it.”

At the end of the day, though, “it doesn’t matter as much where you go,” says Seegert, “as what you make of the undergraduate experience.” ▲

Scott Driscoll writes from Seattle.



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