

Sunday, Oct. 15, 2000

In or Out: Inside College Admissions

By JODIE MORSE

What to do about Theater Boy? That was the question vexing Peggy Walbridge and David Field as the two admissions readers paged through his application to Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. With a 1,420 SAT score, solid grades and top scores on two Advanced Placement exams, the applicant — we're calling him Theater Boy to protect his identity — certainly looked like Cornell material. He had appeared in professional music productions and helped raise over \$50,000 to stage plays at his school. "That's pretty amazing," Walbridge muttered. Field chuckled as he read through the applicant's essay about his voice changing from a once beautiful boyhood soprano. Said Field: "There's a nice sense of humor in this writing."

Still, something gave the readers pause. There was nothing outstanding in the applicant's two teacher recommendations. A more gushing letter came from his boss at the pizza place where he worked after school, detailing Theater Boy's rapport with the restaurant's immigrant cooks. "He sure sounds like a wonderful employee," said Walbridge. Field interjected, "But is he a real scholar?" Theater Boy wrote that he wants to study politics and history. But the two readers wondered why he hadn't studied more of them already. Theater Boy's moment was fading as quickly as it came. "The more I think about it, I don't see enough real scholarship here," sighed Field. "I just have a feeling we can do better."

They can, because Cornell, like other elite colleges, has seven applicants for every spot in its freshman class. As 1.2 million high school seniors begin the college-application process in earnest this month, competition has never been fiercer. Nor have students been better prepared. These days, kids in junior high take high school academic classes to make room for more demanding courses in the later grades. And in just the past decade, there's been an 83% increase in the number of ninth-graders who take the sat — just for practice.

But even if you didn't take calculus in the ninth grade, there are steps you can take at application time to better your odds. Last spring three of the country's most selective schools — Rice University, Bowdoin College and Cornell University — allowed TIME behind the closed doors of their admissions deliberations. The one stipulation: that TIME not use the names or certain identifying characteristics of kids like Theater Boy. The insights we gleaned won't substitute for top scores and grades. But they did puncture some of the myths that often prevent an applicant from winning admission to his or her favorite college.

Myth 1 Make yourself look as well rounded as possible

You would think that a flutist-cum-poet with a 1,520 sat, an unblemished transcript and a passion for philosophy would find a warm welcome at Houston's Rice University. Renaissance Girl was involved in so many extracurricular activities — band, the literary magazine, the astronomy, philosophy and poetry clubs — that it took minute

handwriting to squeeze them onto the application. Yet she never made it off the waiting list.

In the parlance of Rice's admissions committee, Renaissance Girl was a "clubber," a serial joiner of school organizations who never rises to a leadership position. One Cornell applicant submitted a one-page, single-spaced addendum to his application that cataloged, as one admissions officer exasperatedly termed it, "every activity he's ever participated in." With the "spread too thin" designation on his voting sheet, even his perfect 800 score on the verbal half of the SAT wasn't enough to stave off rejection.

Says Don Saleh, Cornell's dean of admissions and financial aid: "Students should occupy leadership roles and show years of commitment. That's one way we know kids aren't doing activities just to put them on their applications." Another is to ask how many hours students spend on each activity. And in an instance where the numbers seemed high? A gimlet-eyed Cornell officer whipped out a calculator to reveal that the (unsuccessful) applicant claimed to spend 50 hours a week on after-school pursuits.

Myth 2 The essay counts only in close calls

Before even glancing at grades or test scores, admissions officers at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, rate a student's personal statement. That first impression can color the whole discussion. The committee, for example, issued a swift rejection to a student whose essay was riddled with typos. After reading a moving tale of how one student bonded with a Chilean immigrant struggling to educate his children, assistant dean Debbie DeVeaux went to bat for the applicant: "I love this guy. I hope you love him as much as I do."

A little warmth and humor never hurts either. Bowdoin requires a second, shorter essay on an influential teacher. Most students opt for a boiler-plate hymn to the hardest teacher in school. But a rare description of a teacher who "was big, but not overweight ... like you could trust her to provide you with bread and beef through the winter" got the committee laughing. And the essay's touching conclusion — "she taught me how to improve from a mistake and still like myself" — sent them straight for the admit stamp. Otherwise, the student's B record would not have got him in.

Admissions officers say the most successful essays show curiosity and self-awareness. Says Cornell's Saleh: "It's the only thing that really lets us see inside your soul." While there's no one right formula for soul baring, there are many wrong ones. It's disastrous to write, as one Rice applicant did, of what he could "bring to the University of California." A self-absorbed or arrogant tone is also a guaranteed turnoff. Exhibit A: a Rice essay beginning, "I have accumulated a fair amount of wisdom in a relatively limited time of life." Exhibit B: A Cornell applicant who set out to "describe the indescribable essence of myself."

The officers accept that student essays are often heavily edited and adapted for multiple applications. But if an essay seems too polished, they'll often compare the writing with that in other parts of the application, and even to a student's verbal SAT score.

Myth 3 Send your "award-winning" art portfolio

Each spring admissions officers amass boxes full of discarded watercolors and videotaped productions of the Music Man — and the occasional batch of brownies — all sent by students hoping such extras will increase their prospects. More often they distract readers from the real meat of the application. One Cornell applicant, Budding Author, directed readers to her "countless short stories and novellas." Though the admissions officers were impressed with the other parts of Budding Author's application, they didn't quite know what to make of her creative writing. "Well it's not quite soft porn," said a confused Walbridge. Instead of receiving a fat acceptance packet, Budding Author was wait-listed.

At Cornell and Bowdoin, admissions readers typically send art slides and music tapes out to department heads to get an expert appraisal. Those rare applicants who get a ringing endorsement are usually instant hits back in the committee room. That was the case for one student's trumpet performance, which received the top rating from Cornell's music department. But, noted reader Ken Gabard, "it's only 1 in 100 who gets this kind of reception."

Myth 4 Don't spill your guts

Admissions officers love a good against-all-odds story line. "We like to see that kids have overcome adversity," says Cornell's Gabard. "Goodness knows, they'll face adversity in college." Provided the adversity is authentic — like a death in the family — it can make a much more gripping essay topic than a summer jaunt through Europe. And if applicants have suffered any dip in academic performance, they need to account for it, either in an essay or a counselor's letter.

With scattered Cs in the ninth and 10th grades and football and guitar as his only extracurriculars, Comeback Kid would normally have missed Bowdoin's first cut of applications. But in his essay he wrote of how he'd spent those first two years of high school: "slowly poisoning myself in a pool of malted hops." Then a close relative who was an alcoholic died of a stroke. After that, he cut out the beer, got A-pluses in his senior year and won a national writing award. He also won a unanimous thumbs-up for admission.

Schools are also taken with good students from families with little education or money. At Bowdoin, this is known as an "NC/BC" case, for no college/blue collar; at Rice, it's an application with "overcome" factors. At Cornell, admissions readers were initially not too impressed by a student with good test scores but whose grades were all over the map. Then one reader noticed that she came from a family with no higher education and worked up to 40 hours a week as a cashier. But it was her essay that really swayed the committee, as she described being derisively called "white girl" by some other blacks and related how one classmate told her that he "looked forward to seeing me 'flipping burgers' after graduation."

Before you go crafting your sob story, it bears noting that college admissions officers are among the world's finest b.s. detectors. A case in point: one student's Cornell essay about a relative's homosexuality struck an admissions reader as gratuitous: "This has got shock value written all over it."

Myth 5 If a teacher says he'll write a rec, it will be a good one

For admissions officers, there's a distinct hierarchy to recommendation letters. "Brilliant means more than bright," says Bowdoin's senior associate dean of admissions Linda Kreamer. "'Hardworking and motivated' probably means the student isn't too smart." Cornell readers bristled at a recommendation hailing a student who "cares more about what he learns than what grades he gets." Translation: If admitted, he'd wind up on academic probation.

The best recommendations describe a student's accomplishments with specific and knowing details. Bowdoin's admissions committee was on the fence about one applicant who had good grades but below-average test scores. Then it scanned his two recommendations. "A rare gem," said one letter; the other called him a "mature humanitarian." Most compelling, though, was a tidbit missing from the rest of the application. The student had come up with a unique scheme for supporting world famine relief: he pledged his weekly allowance and persuaded his parents to give matching grants. Cornell readers were similarly impressed with a letter that touted an applicant's papers on Billie Holiday and Vietnam veterans.

To improve his accolades, a student shouldn't necessarily ask the best teacher in school, who's probably swamped with other requests, but should instead seek out someone who really knows him and his work. A student should also jog the memory of his recommender with a cheat sheet of his accomplishments — including a copy of a well-received term paper.

Myth 6 Don't be too eager

Colleges want students who want them. That's one reason why kids who apply for early decision have a leg up. But for all applicants, it's unwise to skip a college's visit to your high school or, as one Rice applicant did, to ask an alumni interviewer if Rice was just a "second-tier" institution. As with most interactions a student has with a college, this one was duly noted. The interviewer wrote, "I don't think Rice should accept him."

There are also less obvious faux pas, like stating your intended major without checking that it's offered. Students are sometimes asked the number of schools to which they're applying, and some colleges take offense at being one of many under consideration. Rice was weighing one superbly qualified applicant when a reader mentioned that the school was just one of 15 on his list. The student wound up on the wait list.

But such close calls can just as easily swing the other way. Bowdoin's committee was ambivalent about one applicant until it read a last-minute addition to his file, a note saying, "Bowdoin College is at the top of my list." He was admitted.