INSIDE COLLEGE A

An exclusive look at the admissions process of three top schools exposes the myths that keep students from getting into the college of their choice

By **JODIE MORSE** ITHACA

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 musical 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 had come. "The more I think about it, I don't see enough real scholarship here," said Field. "I



HOW FEW THEY ADMIT

The stats on this year's freshmen: CORNELL UNIVERSITY Of 20,200 who applied, officials say, 75% were qualified. Only 6,170 were accepted BOWDOIN COLLEGE 4,172 applied; 1,158 were accepted; 20% of enrolled freshmen had perfect high school records RICE UNIVERSITY 6,802 applied; 1,586 were accepted; the university could have filled an entire class with students who scored more than 1,400 on their SATs



ADMISSIONS

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. A Cornell applicant submitted a one-page, single-spaced addendum to his application that cataloged, as an admissions officer exasperatedly termed it, "every activity he's ever participated in."

THIS GRITTY ESSAY helped sway admissions officers at Cornell

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 a 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 hurt either. Bowdoin requires a second, shorter essay on an influential

- Think about something you never did in high school but wish you had done. Now imagine your time at Cornell. Propose taking up something daring and new, and describe how it might affect your life
- "A stone, a leaf, an unfound door." Look Homeward, Angel, Thomas Wolfe. Write about three objects that would give the admissions selection committee insight into who you are.
- E.B. White, author, journalist, and Cornell graduate (1921) wrote: "Where I would like to discover facts, I find fancy. Where I would like to learn what I did, I learn only what I was thinking. They are loaded with opinion, moral thoughts, quick evaluations, youthful hopes and cares and sorrows. Occasionally, they manage to report something in exquisite honesty and accuracy. That is why I have refrained from burning them." Please write a page from your own life journal that reports something "in exquisite honesty and accuracy."

Maya Angelou once wrote: "The hells we have lived through and live through still, have sharpened our senses and toughened our will." (Million Man March Poem) For the last 13 years, I have attended a predominantly upper class, white school, but I have lived in a middle class, Black neighborhood. I have had to struggle with stereotypes, racism and my own identity from both ends of the spectrum. I never used to fit in anywhere. I always was "too white" for my Black friends and "too Black" for my white friends. This problem escalated as I moved on to high school. My two best friends, who were white, began to act as if they didn't know me. My Foreign L... Teacher tried to discourage me from taking advanced classes. A student once asked me ... (although it is common knowledge to the whole student and sta... Later that year, I heard ...

teacher. Most students opt for a boilerplate 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 a 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."

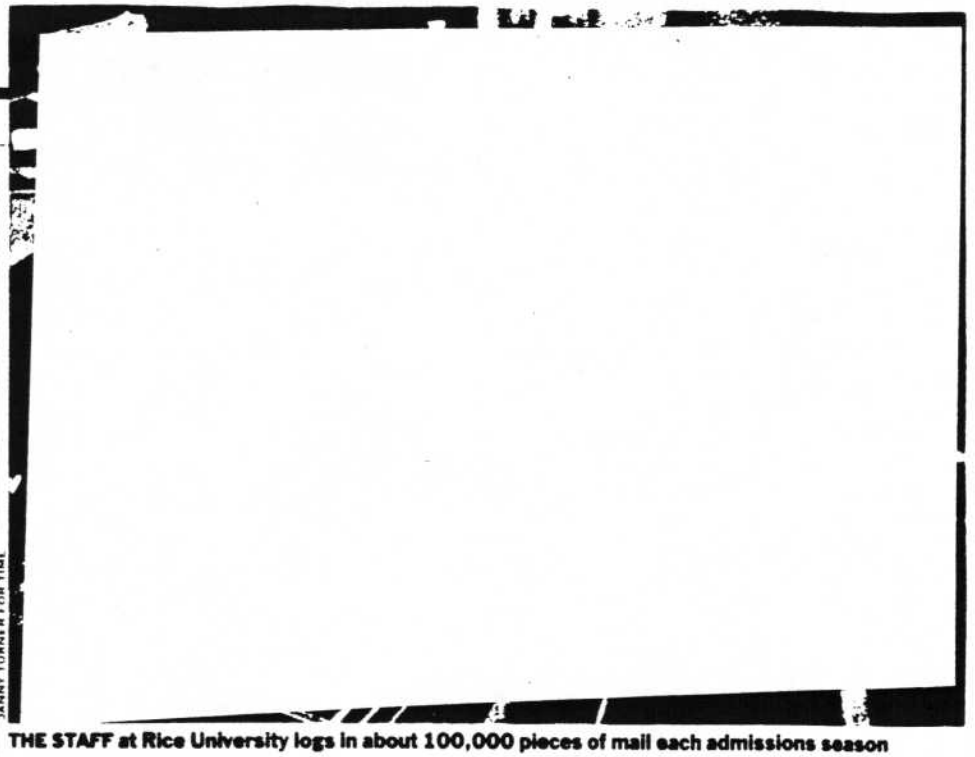
The officers accept that student essays are often heavily edited and adapted for multiple applications. But if an essay seems too polished, they'll often compare the writing with that in other parts of the application, and even to a student's verbal SAT score.

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. A 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.



ART seldom helps students, but these designs by a Cornell applicant were the rare exception



DANNY TURNER FOR TIME

THE STAFF at Rice University logs in about 100,000 pieces of mail each admissions season

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 a 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. "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 in 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, Comeback Kid 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 a 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 a 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: a 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 an 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 a 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 a 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. *—With reporting by Andrew Goldstein/Brunswick and Flora Tartaovsky/Houston*

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Yes, Your Race Still Matters

As students primp and preen to wow their favorite colleges, there's one characteristic they can't control: their race. That's one reason voters, courts and politicians in six states have outlawed racial preferences in college admissions, while other colleges, fearful of lawsuits, play down their affirmative-action efforts these days. But make no mistake: race still matters. How much depends on the school and the state.

In Texas, public universities have managed to counteract the effect of racial-preference bans by automatically admitting the top 10% of the graduating class of every high school, including those schools where most students are minorities. But Rice University in Houston, private and highly selective, has had to reinvent its admissions strategies to maintain the school's minority enrollment. Each February, 80 to 90 black, Hispanic and Native American kids visit Rice on an expenses-paid trip. Rice urges counselors from high schools with large minority populations to nominate qualified students. And in the fall, Rice sends two recruiters on the road to find minority applicants; each recruiter visits about 80 predominantly black or Hispanic high schools. Two weeks ago, Rice recruiter Tamara Siler dropped in on Westlake High in Atlanta, where 99% of the 1,296 students are black. Siler went bearing literature and advice, and though only two kids showed up, she said, "I'm pleased I got two."

Rice has also resorted to some almost comical end-runs around the spirit of the law. The university used to award a yearly scholarship to a Mexican-American student; now it goes to a student who speaks Spanish really well. Admissions officers no longer know an applicant's race. But a new essay question asks about each student's "background" and "cultural traditions." When Rice officials read applications, they look for "diverse life experiences" and what they awkwardly call "overcome students," who have triumphed over hardship.

Last spring, admissions readers came across a student whose SAT score was lower than 1,200 and who did not rank in the top 10% of her class. Numerically speaking, she lagged far behind most accepted applicants. But her essay and recommendations indicated a strong interest in civil rights and personal experience with racial discrimination. She was admitted. "All the newspapers say affirmative action is done," says a veteran counselor at a large New York City high school. "But nothing has changed. I have a [minority] kid at Yale with an SAT score in the high 900s."

While minority admissions at the University of California system overall have dipped only slightly since a ban on affirmative action took effect in 1998, they have plummeted at the most selective campuses. At Berkeley, for example, the class entering this fall included 608 Chicano students, vs. 1,013 in 1997. In response, the élite schools have moved aggressively to recruit at minority high schools—and even to improve the performance of students who are graduating from them. This year the U.C. system will spend $250 million on outreach, from installing tutors at low-income schools to inviting high school teachers to summer calculus seminars. *—By Amanda Ripley. Reported by Flora Tartakovsky/Houston and David Nordan/Atlanta*

FINDING MINORITIES now means hundreds of school visits for Rice's recruiters