

Armchair college fair

Admissions directors want real achievement

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Neatness counts.

At least it counts when Alex Nezematz, director of admissions at St. Bonaventure College in Olean, N.Y., is reviewing students' application forms.

Nezematz pointed out that sloppy applications — written illegibly, for example — or submitted in pencil generally count against students.

"When you can read them, it makes it much easier," Nezematz commented.

And don't have your parents fill them out.

"I can tell when mom does it. I can tell when dad does it," he said. "The first thing I think is the kid didn't care enough to fill out his own application."

Mary Anne Mudge, senior associate director of admissions at Rochester's Nazareth College, pointed out that a visit to a school helps to show how much the student cares about going to that school.

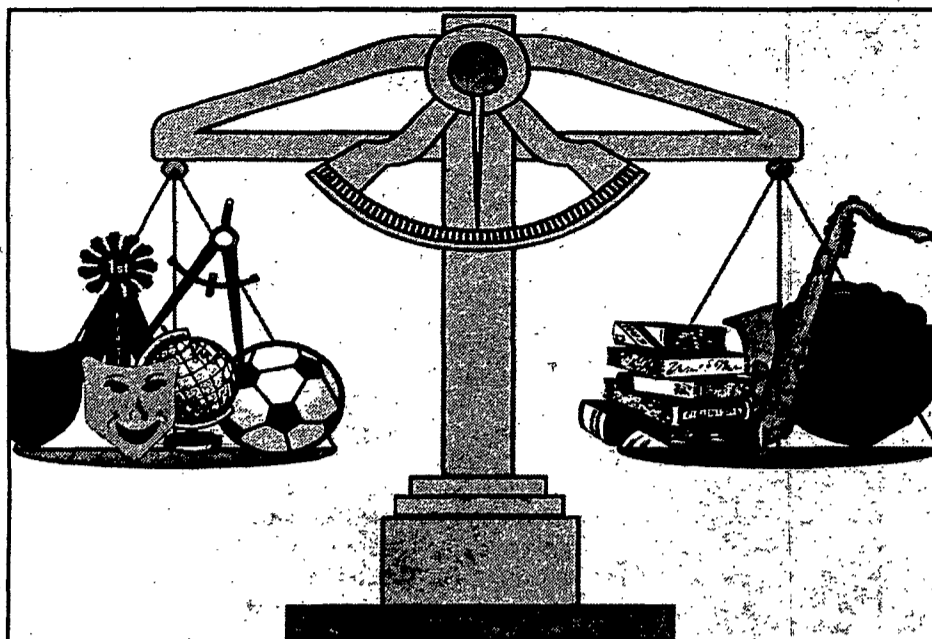
"If a student never visits, how interested are they?" Mudge said. "An interview is a two-way street. They are looking at the school, and the school gets to know them better."

With thousands of students sharing similar high-school averages and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, such simple things as neatness on the application and personal visits may mean the difference between receiving a letter of acceptance or being rejected, admissions officers said.

Students regularly seek out ways to get an edge in the application process. But what gives such an edge may not necessarily conform to popular myths.

One myth, for instance, is simply that the more involvement in activities, the better.

"You see students who thicken their



files. They throw everything and anything in," observed Peter Orschiedt, associate director of admissions at Cornell University in Ithaca. "I'm not sure that's good."

When he is reviewing applications, he looks for depth of involvement.

"I think significant participation is something I think about: If it's a kid who was a student leader, and has held offices in the school, not just went to a meeting once for 15 minutes so they can add it to their resume," Orschiedt said.

"There's so many hours in the day, and admissions counselors are going to look at a thick file and say, 'Come on,'" he added.

Still, colleges do look at outside activities as signs of life beyond school, noted Mara O'Laughlin, director of admissions at Hobart College in Geneva.

"If there's nothing going on in their lives beyond a sterling record in school, that certainly raises my eyebrows," O'Laughlin

said. Students should show "some ongoing commitment to a couple of things."

"I want a student who's been involved in their high school and involved in their community," Nezematz remarked. "Students who are involved tend to have better time management skills."

It also helps if those activities relate to the students' proposed majors, Mudge acknowledged.

"Any kind of experiential activity helps," she said.

Thus, when possible, students should seek out internships or shadowing programs, or should try to find part-time jobs or volunteer activities that fit in with their career goals, she noted.

At the same time, though, colleges recognize that students may not have the luxury of tailoring their schedules with potential majors in mind, Mudge observed.

"There's quite a few students that do have to work, and that limits what they can do in school," Mudge said. "We don't hold that against them."

Nezematz suggested that students consider jobs as a source of more than just money or experience related to a potential major or career: Students should look to employers as a source of letters of recommendation, and thus not rely solely on high-school guidance counselors and teachers.

"Outside letters of recommendation probably say a lot more than ones from inside the school," Nezematz observed. "They tell a lot about the students."

A second myth is that a high grade-point average is a guarantee of acceptance.

"We look at the kinds of courses that they take, especially in relation to what they want to do in college," Mudge said. "We look at whether the courses are college prep or honors level."

O'Laughlin noted that not only do the kinds of courses the students take count, but also whether they face special challenges in taking them, such as learning dis-

abilities.

One area where students can point out such difficulties is in the essay most colleges require.

"When I read an essay and a student takes a risk and reveals something about themselves, that always hits me," O'Laughlin said.

At the same time, students should be careful when writing the essays to make sure they are well-written — not full of grammatical or spelling errors, or poorly structured, O'Laughlin added.

"With computers and spell checks these days, nothing should be sent in that's sloppy, ill-conceived and dashed off," she said.

At Cornell, for example, faculty members help with the selection process, Orschiedt said, and "faculty are bullish on writing. Good writing skills can offset deficiencies in other areas."

Yet another myth is that students can relax during their senior years of high school. Not so, according to Orschiedt.

"Senior year is not a good time to rest on your laurels," he noted. In the cases of students on the fence, he acknowledged, selection committees consider senior grades and the difficulty of courses taken during that year in making final decisions.

"When you go to college, you're going to the Olympics of the mind," Mudge declared. "Senior year, you are in training."

Further, students have to show they have put some thought into why they want to go to a particular college and pursue a particular major, Nezematz observed. During interviews with potential students, for example, he frequently asks why they chose to apply to St. Bonaventure. He noted that a sure way to undermine an interview is to shrug and respond, "I don't know."

Orschiedt pointed out that Cornell University actually consists of seven different colleges, each with its own application process and requirements. Thus a student needs to do some research even before applying.

"A student who knows what his or her choice means, that's a plus," he said.

O'Laughlin pointed out that colleges today are looking not only for academically skilled students, but also students "who can increase the range and diversity of a class." Thus students need to keep in mind that factors such as special talents, socioeconomic background and geography can come into play — and perhaps tailor their applications and essays to point out any such needs they can fill.

Despite the pressure involved in the application process, Orschiedt suggested that students turn it into a positive thing.

"Use the process to learn about yourself — who you are and what you want — and forget about the application," Orschiedt said. "Get something out of the process. Then the student can look at themselves in a mirror and can say, 'Hey, I enjoyed the process.'"

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