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## Colleges leaning toward enthusiastic applicants

Smaller colleges admit to looking favorably upon applicants who have visited the campus or who have shown personal interest in the particular school.

By JUSTIN POPE  
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With more students applying for college, smaller schools are trying to choose applicants who have a personal interest in them. With limited space for new students each year, admissions directors try to pick students who will actually attend their school if accepted. (AP Photo/Daniel Shanken)

Dani Kochavi knew George Washington University was her top college choice, and she wanted GW to know it.

She applied early decision, promising to enroll if admitted. She also scheduled an interview, then followed up with a note to an admissions officer. She made a point to introduce herself at a college fair. She touched base with the gymnastics and cheerleading coaches about continuing those sports in college, hoping word would filter back to the admissions office.

She's not sure it made a difference, but it definitely didn't hurt. She's now in her freshman year at the school in Washington, D.C.

"It's always that extra little hello," she says, "that sticks in somebody's head."

Simply applying to a school shows some enthusiasm for it, but admissions officers have always looked favorably on applicants who show just a little extra interest -- without going overboard. Recently, the trend has intensified.

Colleges -- especially private, selective ones -- face growing pressure to admit applicants who are likely to enroll. More and more schools are using software to log correspondence and campus visits to see who's going the extra mile.

"We've been saying to families and to kids that interest is an increasingly important factor," said Susan Wilmer, director of college counseling at Brooks School in North Andover, Mass. "When I speak with the college representatives in March of the senior year about my candidate pool, what they tell me is, 'Susan, we're not going to take X; we're just not convinced that he's very interested in us.'"

The development poses a challenge for students: how to show they want to enroll without becoming a pest. Some also worry the new emphasis could harm applicants with less money, since expressing interest can be costly.

Colleges are telling students "if they can incur the cost of flying halfway across they country, they'll prove they love us," said Marty Nemko, a California college consultant, author and columnist.

The colleges say they recognize everyone can't afford a visit, and insist there are many other ways to demonstrate interest, such as a thoughtful application essay.

"Where we get off track are the students or parents who say, 'So what you're saying is, I need to visit five times,'" said Daniel Walls, dean of admission at Emory University in Atlanta, which began listing "demonstrated interest" as a tip factor in its admissions literature about five years ago. "We're not keeping score."

But many are paying attention, especially in the regular decision round, when schools don't really know if they're a student's dream choice or a back up.

Colleges are looking to increase their "yield," or percentage of admitted students who enroll. High yields make it easier to guess how many students to admit; an accurate estimate saves money and headaches later. High yields also can mean a happier campus, full of students who want to be there. Finally, yield is used in some college rankings formulas, though the best known, US News & World Report, recently dropped it.

Yields are hard to maintain these days because students are applying to -- and inevitably turning down -- more schools. The spread of the common application, which lets students apply to more colleges with little extra work, has helped fuel an increase in applications that not even fees of \$75 or more per school have cooled.

More than half of colleges consider "demonstrated interest" a factor, according to a recent National Association for College Admission Counseling survey. Most called it marginal -- but it scored as a more important criterion than SAT II subject matter tests or race and ethnicity.

"It's that last few hundred decisions one makes where that (campus) visit is going to play a role," said Gail Sweezey, director of admissions at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. At Earlham College in Indiana, demonstrated interest affects which students are admitted off the wait-list.

Colleges insist enthusiasm can't replace a substandard record. Nor, most say, will its absence sink an otherwise strong application. Sweezey says she has never tried to boost yield by denying admission to a strong student because she didn't believe the student would enroll (a practice Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania admitted to several years ago, but says it has stopped).

Colgate University goes out of its way to ignore the "demonstrated interest" factor -- but sometimes it isn't easy. Every year, it receives hundreds of applications that reveal, presumably by accident, that Colgate is not the student's top choice.

"We'll be reading a (recommendation) from a teacher and that teacher might say, 'all Johnny or Janie has been talking about for the last year has been their desire to go to College X,' and College X is not Colgate," said dean of admissions Gary Ross.

Hundreds of students make the same mistake in their essays. But it isn't necessarily a fatal blow.

"That's an indication of sloppiness," Ross said. "But if the student is a highly competitive, very bright, highly capable young man or woman, we would not deny them admission."

*Story produced by  
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