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Greetings from THE SHORT LIST!

You've Submitted Your College Application. Now What?

By Zach Miners

FOR MOST STUDENTS APPLYING ON REGULAR DEADLINES, the college application season has ended. But just because your applications are sent out, that doesn't necessarily mean your work trying to get accepted at your favorite school is over. Counselors and admissions officers at schools across the country say there are still some things you can do to get an edge, as long as you don't go overboard. "Most students feel that once the application is submitted, that's it," says Eric Greenberg, founder and director of the advising and tutoring firm Greenberg Educational Group. "But the reality is that colleges are often very receptive to getting additional information later on."

One remaining task, which many students are already aware of, is to follow up with senior grades and additional test scores. In turn, it's important to be in regular contact with your high school guidance counselor and not to assume that he or she will send out the scores on your behalf, say officials at St. Michael's College, a Catholic liberal arts school in Vermont. "If the college you are hoping to get into wants to see your progress, it is your responsibility to show them," says admission director Jacqueline Murphy.

Think about how you want to do it, though. Experts say that guidance counselors can carry an incredibly large workload, so it might be smart to hedge your bets and have a teacher send a letter to the university on your continuing academic progress. And it is not a bad idea to notify schools of honors, awards, or special achievements accomplished during senior year or even to submit additional recommendations. However, whether such information is considered by the admissions staff depends on the timing. And if you're applying to the most selective universities like Harvard and Yale, experts say that sending a note yourself on having obtained above-average grades--with no corroboration from a teacher or counselor--is probably a waste of

time and effort, because keeping up your winning streak, gradewise, will not exactly make you a standout applicant at those universities. "But at schools that are good but not quite as selective, it could make a difference," says Chris Munoz, vice president for enrollment at Rice University.

Things get trickier when it comes to using more aggressive strategies--like personal communication and campus visits--in the hopes of getting that coveted acceptance packet. After you click "submit," some admissions officers say it can help to get up close and personal, even with the admission counselors themselves. Others say the selectivity of the school should dictate the approach taken. And many experts maintain that attempts to get the attention of admission committees are pointless at best and might even hurt one's chances of acceptance. "Such efforts unfortunately fall flat when received by office staff," says Bob Lay, dean for enrollment management at Boston College.

So what really is the best route to take? Most university officials are in agreement on at least one thing: Coming to campus for an event other than an admissions program, provided that the applicant is in range of meeting the admissions requirements, might deliver a good message. Visiting the school again, meeting with faculty members, sitting in on a class, and attending any regional events that the school might host are all good ways not just to make an informed decision on whether to attend the school but also to demonstrate to the admissions committee that you are truly interested in the institution. And whether it is a first or second visit to the campus, educational consultant Greenberg says it is perfectly acceptable to send a letter to the school explaining why the visit was useful in determining that the school is a good fit. Moreover, because most students typically wait until they receive an acceptance letter to visit or revisit the school,

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experts say now might be a better time to learn more about the college without the flurry of excited seniors who typically visit in the spring.

Making the Most of a College Road Trip

Victoria Valle, the assistant vice chancellor of enrollment management at Southern Illinois University, also recommends that students check out blogs and other online media as a way to make connections or get information on a college. Think of it as "friending" your top-choice schools, says Rob Durkle, vice president and dean of admission for the University of Dayton in Ohio. And some schools, such as Bentley University in Waltham, Mass., are even using Facebook as a channel to answer questions from prospective students.

The very nature of the admissions process today could also provide an impetus for students to take action after they apply. Because it is so competitive, students are applying to a greater number of colleges to boost their chances of acceptance, and colleges are having a harder time estimating who will actually come. So "demonstrated interest," or keen enthusiasm for a school, is a factor that admissions officers are increasingly considering as they make their decisions. "We welcome phone calls from applicants who want to check on their status or simply tell us more about themselves that we can't find in the written application," says Sherri Salmon, dean of enrollment management at Birmingham-Southern College in Birmingham, Ala.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling, in its annual survey of admissions trends, recently found that 22 percent of colleges gave interest "considerable importance" in admissions, up from 7 percent in 2003. An additional 30 percent of schools rated it as moderately important. "Colleges want to accept students who are going to show up," says Arlene Cash, vice president for enrollment management at Spelman College, a historically black college in Atlanta. She adds, however, that students should heed that philosophy most at middle-tier colleges and universities. At open-enrollment colleges, there is no question about whether the student will get in, and at the superelite institutions, "there are too few admissions staffers with too many things coming at them," she says. If you've got your sights set on a highly selective school, Cash says your best bet is making sure all elements of your application are flawless. "You want to stay on their radar, but it can be distracting if you get in their faces too much," she warns.

Scott Friedhoff, vice president for enrollment and communications at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, offers some slightly different advice. "Calling the admissions office to see if obtaining tickets to a play, concert, or ballgame is possible" could yield positive results, he says.

But regardless of the extent to which admissions officers weigh--or appreciate--demonstrated interest or personalized touches, experts say those elements will most likely not trump other factors like grades or test scores. "There's no amount of expressed interest or post-application submission activity that can take the place of a strong academic profile," says Gil Villanueva, dean of admission at the University of Richmond in Virginia. He adds that admissions staffers would not want to disadvantage applicants who might not have the resources to fly out to a campus to demonstrate their interest.

Still, if your goal is simply to make an impression--good or bad--sending a self-designed postcard or newsletter could be the way to go. "There is nothing that can compensate for a strong initial application," says Cheryl Brown, director of undergraduate admissions at SUNY-Binghamton. "But we sure get a kick out of seeing how creative students can be!"