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The Decision

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THE DECISION



With more than 4,000 applicants for 490 spots, Colby's Admissions Office finds a way to decide who gets in

Jessica Ruthruff of San Jose, Calif., and her mother, Linda, are on a rite of passage for teenagers and their parents. Over two weeks in January they visit nine colleges Jessica has applied to in New England, New York and Minnesota. Jessica, a serious and organized young woman, has pored over college guidebooks, surfed Web sites, attended college fairs and read piles of admissions materials. She has followed college students around on campus tours, eaten in dining halls and taken copious notes and digital pictures to jog her memory once she's back home. Now Jessica and her mother pause in the sunny lobby of Colby's Lunder House, chat with admissions officers, plan their next step, all in an attempt to best decide where Jessica wants to spend the next four years of her life.

But first, the colleges have to decide whether they want her.

At that very moment, just down the hall in Lunder House, carefully gathered in a red folder, is Jessica's application—high school transcript and SAT scores, carefully worded essays, the CD of her playing the harp. It is just one of more than 4,100 folders of applications. Most are alphabetized in 11 file boxes lined up on two large tables. Some are piled in small stacks on the desks, chairs and even floors of Colby's admissions offices. Reading season is underway, and a dozen staff members are busy pulling applications from the boxes and deciding whether Jessica and each of her fellow applicants will be offered a spot in Colby's Class of 2008 come April.

Jessica hopes she's one of the chosen. "Who are they going to pick? Which one?" she wonders.

By Alicia Nemiccolo MacLeay '97

Photos by Fred Field



Stiff competition? More than 4,000 applications are processed annually by the admissions staff.

Who decides? And how? Does a committee sit around a table and debate an applicant's merits? Is the decision based on a perfunctory glance at SAT scores?

What exactly happens to an application once it leaves a student's hands and enters what may seem like a black hole?

At Colby, an application's journey toward the "accept" or "deny" pile starts in the basement mailroom of Lunder House. Application materials (teacher recommendations leading the way) start arriving in trickles in October and build to nine mail buckets-worth and hundreds of online applications a day before the January 1 regular admissions deadline (the deadline for Early Decision round one is November 15).

From December 28 to January 3 the mailroom's fax machine runs continuously, primarily for international applications. Every application and its components are sorted, stamped by date and put in a color-coded folder—red for domestic applicants, yellow for international and purple for transfers. Online applications, accounting for 38 per-

cent of this year's total, are downloaded, printed and added to the queue.

"It's all organization," Carol-lyn Greaves, admissions mail coordinator, said of the process and numerous people who keep straight thousands of very important pieces of paper and the occasional same-named students.

While applicants wait and wonder, the decision making begins, with every application, recommendation and test score carefully considered. "We actually do read the applications, contrary to what some might believe," said K.C. Hammond, associate director of admissions and financial aid and the one who makes sure her fellow readers stick to their 18-folders-a-day quota during the nine-week reading season.

In fact, every Colby application is read three times. Two admissions officers separately read and rate applications on a five-point scale for academic and for non-academic qualities. The officers circle the recommended action at the bottom of the application and write down comments to explain their choice.

Applications are sorted into file boxes labeled with the readers' recommendations—accept, reject, wait list, split decision or "swim" (still in the applicant pool, but no decision yet). The boxes are kept outside the second-floor office of Parker Beverage, Colby's dean of admissions and financial aid. It is Beverage who pulls every application from the boxes, reviews each one (regularly taking home batches to read) and occasionally consults with admissions readers about their recommendation.

It is Beverage who signs off on each candidate. Every one.

Beverage's hands-on approach "is stupefying if you consider that we'll receive 4,000-plus applications a year," said Michael Montgomery '96, associate director of admissions and financial aid. "And he actually *remembers* these kids when he's signing their letters of acceptance." In fact he remembers details about many applications for years to come.

Beverage, a tall, earnest man with more than 25 years experience in admissions, the last 19 at Colby, says that personal touch is necessary. "As you're building the class you look at how you're doing with Maine kids, with musicians, diversity and academic quality," he said. "Someone has to have that oversight of how the class is coming together."

The process that ends with Beverage's *yea* or *nay* begins with an evaluation of a student's academic record. At Colby the academic rating reflects a student's demonstrated ability and achievement through evidence like class rank, GPA and test scores. An academic 1-rated applicant might be in the top 1 percent of her class with a 4.0 and have SAT scores above 1400, while a 5 might fall below the top quarter, have a 3.0 GPA and SAT scores below 1000.

Some assume high or perfect SAT scores are enough to clinch an acceptance letter. But Montgomery says standardized test scores aren't the only thing. "Each year I've been in admissions I've recommended that we not accept [some] students with test scores of 1500 and higher," he said. "In the end their classroom performance wasn't very strong

or they weren't very active in the school or community or something else that mattered more to us."

Colby looks for students who will come and be involved in the community, says Steve Thomas, director of admissions, who oversees the approximately 1,000 international applications Colby receives each year (see sidebar on p.17). Given the choice between the 1500-SAT international student who's been an active volunteer and the 1600-SAT "bookworm," Thomas would and does choose the student who's been involved in the community. "There's nothing wrong with that person," said Thomas of the solely academic applicant. "But are they going to be able to lend part of their culture into the culture here and vice versa? Occasionally you get the whole deal, but that's pretty rare."

Accomplishments and activities outside the classroom are carefully rated, too. "It's not a personality thing," said Beverage. "We all have biases, but we try to put them aside to see what the student has accomplished." A student who rates a 1 for non-academic involvements is not only outstanding but the rare exception, perhaps an Appalachian Trail through-hiker or published author. A 5, at the other end of the scale, has few activities or interests. In the middle is the non-academic 3 student with above average extracurricular activities.

While a small amount of subjectivity inevitably creeps into the evaluation process, Beverage and his staff try to look at quantifiable evidence, like awards and transcripts, when judging applicants. If an applicant had to work 20 hours a week to help support his family "you'll factor that character, that grit, into the decision, but you can't be overly subjective," said Beverage. A student's multicultural background or legacy status (if they've had relatives attend Colby) also is considered.

At the beginning of each reading season all of the admissions readers

review four or five applications together for practice to be sure their academic and non-academic ratings are close. "So one person doesn't give an application a one and another a four for the same student," said Beverage.

While many applications are obvious admits or denials, what about all of the perfectly capable applicants—student body presidents, honors students and varsity captains—who fall in the middle? With each reader spending just a half hour to decide whether to recommend admission to Colby, how can an applicant make himself or herself stand out?

A host of college guidebooks claim to have insider's knowledge and trade secrets, but "there really aren't any tricks or formulas that work," said Erik Bertelsen, associate dean of admissions and financial aid, who worked as a high school guidance counselor for 20 years. "A lot of kids are over-packaged. That doesn't work. Be yourself."

"A School on the Move"

Every year colleges report that students are getting better and better. At Colby, at least, it's true.

"It is becoming more competitive," said Parker Beverage, dean of admissions and financial aid, of Colby's applicant pool. Just a decade ago Colby received 3,000 applications and accepted 45 percent of those. Now applications number more than 4,100 and only one third gain admittance. While Beverage cites Colby's rise in visibility and prominence as one factor, another cause is the record number of high school students applying to college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, college enrollment increased 11 percent from 1990 to 2000 and is expected to grow by 10 percent over the next 10 years.

At Colby, it's not only the number of applications going up. The mean SAT score for the admitted Class of '08 is 1380, up 90 points from a decade ago. "It's a school on the move," Beverage said of the College's upward mobility, and the increasing academic caliber pays off with students more engaged in academic life.

Colby is not alone in this upward trend. More, and academically better-prepared, students are competing for a fixed number of spots in the country's top colleges and universities.

That doesn't mean a student can't be unique. Montgomery remembers an application from his first year in admissions when a student's optional picture of himself (usually a family photo or yearbook photo) was of the applicant, as a child, holding a large octopus in his outstretched arms, grinning like he'd won the lottery. The applicant's essay explained that his father was an octopus expert and that the applicant was interested in marine biology. "It was so unique and interesting that I remember it years later," said Montgomery. That student, by the way, was admitted.

So, short of an octopus, what are admissions officers looking for? Passion, they say. Passion for academics, passion for extracurricular activities and passion for Colby. There is no guaranteed script, and a writing style that works for one student might not ring true for another. "I think, for the student who writes the essay from the heart, you can just tell," said Becky Downing '01, assistant director of admissions and financial aid. "Be yourself. Be yourself. Be yourself. That's what we always say in information sessions. At the same time kids are reading all these books about 'the essay that got me into Harvard.'"

While the essay is important, it is only one part of the entire package that liberal arts colleges like Colby look at. If an applicant has a polished essay and the reasons for applying (known as the "Why Colby") response is poorly written, red flags go up, says Judy Brody '58, associate dean of admissions and financial aid. "I always tells kids, 'remember, everything you write is going into your folder.'"

Technology has made putting that application folder together more convenient, allowing students to submit applications online, edit essays more easily and check spelling. It also can lead to costly goofs. Tales abound of Colby essays that begin "Because of your location in rural Vermont . . ."

or conclude “I can’t wait for the chance to set foot on campus and become a Bowdoin student in the fall.”

“We’re not so naïve as to think no one’s applying to any other schools,” said Beverage. “But it’s a mistake they make that they shouldn’t make.”

With all of this attention to craft a well-rounded class, many assume it’s essential to be a well-rounded student. Wrong. “We need kids who excel in certain areas, in addition to the well-rounded ones,” said Beverage. That excellence might be in music, the arts, writing or athletics, to name a few areas.

When students submit slides of their art work or a CD of their musical ability (Ruthruff’s harp talents, for instance) as part of their application, the materials are passed on to the appropriate academic department for review. Music instructors or art professors rate the applicant and provide a written evaluation.

Steven Saunders, associate professor and chair of the Music Department, says he sends a wish list of the very best of the best musicians back to admissions. “We naturally don’t advocate for academically marginal students,” he said, “but hope to make a dif-

ference for students who fall right on the admissions cusp and who would bring to campus unique artistic talents.”

As is true for harpists and sculptors, athletes’ achievements can be a “tip factor.” With the publication of *The Game Of Life* and *Reclaiming the Game*, which looked at athletics at Division III schools, including Colby, the role of athletics in admissions has been the most publicized and controversial talent area recently. But Bertelsen, who acts as the liaison to coaches who recruit and rank athletes, says there is no truth at Colby to the stereotype of athletes who can’t compete in the classroom.

“I think it’s a pretty broad brush that everybody paints about kids who are athletes,” said Bertelsen. “If the kid’s not there academically, it doesn’t matter where they are with athletics.”

If a rated athlete is in the academic ballpark, though, admissions may consider whether his or her talent is so exceptional as to make a significant contribution to the team. However, Bertelsen is quick to point out that “a whole bunch of those kids are very strong students who will get in on their own totally unrelated to their athletic ability.”

Bringing athletes, writers, mathematicians and others to Colby benefits sports programs, academic departments and campus life. Admissions benefits from the professional judgment of faculty and coaches who can identify which students have truly extraordinary accomplishments. But the contact between coaches or professors and applicants has another benefit—it increases “yield,” the probability that an accepted student will choose to enroll at Colby. “The more personal contact and connection there is, I think the more likely it is that a kid will enroll,” said Bertelsen.

Beverage says the coaching model clearly works in yielding top students, and he’d like to replicate that contact more formally with academics. If a student who’s an obvious admit expresses interest in environmental science, Beverage says he might ask David Firmage, Clara C. Piper Professor of Environmental Studies, to e-mail the applicant about Colby’s offerings. “The hope is that you become enamored of Colby if you’ve heard from Colby all along,” said Beverage, and that come April that top-notch admitted student will choose Colby.

With admissions officers paying such



Prospective students and their family members attend an information session during a campus visit.

Intense Competition Among International Students

Competition is stiff for American students. For international students it's stiffer still.

"We have to turn down kids from Bulgaria who clearly if they were American students with their profile, they would be in like that," said Steve Thomas, with a snap of the fingers. "But they're in that pool that has restricted money."

Part of competition comes down to international financial aid. Colby guarantees it will meet the demonstrated financial need of all admitted students. For domestic students federal financial aid and Colby aid meet that need, and since 2000 the Shelby and Gale Davis family, including their son Andrew Davis '85, has met the financial need of all United World College graduates admitted to Colby. But regular international applicants seeking aid have to compete for the limited amount Colby has available to dole out. In a typical year 700 applicants seeking aid will apply and only 25 to 30 will be admitted.

The good news—for students and Colby—is that international applicants from the Maldives to Ethiopia have Thomas, director of admissions, to help guide them through the process. Thomas oversees the entire international applicant pool ("You have to know all the different pools and what's a strong Romanian application versus a strong Brazilian application versus a strong Nigerian," he said), reviewing each application and visiting schools abroad. In his five years at Colby he says international applications have increased from 600 to about 1,000.

"You're talking about kids with 1550, some kids have 1600 SATs. Just everything. Amazing people," said Thomas of the ones who get in. "There are a lot of other kids who have 1400 SATs and straight A's and they don't get in. And why didn't they get in? Well it has to do with competition." For many, the SAT, given in English, is taken in their non-native language.

Andrei Roman of Bucharest, Romania, is one of Thomas's "amaz-

ing" international applicants and one of the rare international students in Colby's Class of 2008 who was admitted early decision. Roman says he became interested in Colby after hearing about its emphasis on international relations and seeing photos of the campus. "Colby had everything that I was looking for," he said. Despite some friends encouraging him to apply to Harvard or Yale, he says Colby's academics, beautiful campus and warm and welcoming atmosphere made it his perfect match.

Credit Thomas for conveying that welcoming atmosphere since Roman has yet to set foot on Mayflower Hill. Because few international applicants have the opportunity to visit campus, making contact becomes even more critical for the admissions staff. Thomas personally answers every e-mail inquiry he receives from candidates like Roman, from questions about the Maine weather to how to submit test scores. He also meets with interested international students when traveling abroad.

That response distinguishes Colby from other schools, says Thomas. "If you're that far away and you're not going to get on a plane, that's how you make your decisions and your judgments, the way that a school treats you," he said. "Once you understand that, you understand how critical it is from the admissions perspective to have that kind of communication, even though it's incredibly labor intensive."

Roman appreciated the attention. He said he had been warned that admissions officers were rigid and cold mistake-hunters but found the opposite true at Colby. Now he considers Thomas a friend, even though the two have yet to meet.

He's not alone in that feeling. On Thomas's office shelf sit holiday cards and gifts from numerous students he's come to know as Colby's link to the international applicant pool.

"I have gone through an unbelievable experience," said Roman of his admission to Colby. And that was just the application process.

careful attention to each applicant—interviewing students in person, taking applications home at night and on weekends, reading personal essays on everything from the death of a parent to the most inspiring teacher—do they ever feel an emotional attachment to certain students who've pinned their college hopes on Colby?

When Becky Downing first began interviewing applicants she remembers thinking each was the best ever. "Everyone would laugh at me," she said. "Over time you start to have a different perception of which students really stand out and which ones are doing great things, but there may be a lot of students in the applicant pool who have done those great things."

Of course, most applicants don't get in. Do admissions officers ever feel even a hint

of sadness or guilt when they deny a student what may be their first-choice college?

"So often I'll write 'perfectly capable wonderful kid, but not at the top of the pool,'" said Thomas, who has read some riveting stories from international applicants. In one example, an African refugee saw his family killed and set on fire when he was 12 years old and managed to escape and succeed in school. "He was a great success story of what he'd done, but he wasn't ready for this academically," Thomas said. "So those kinds, especially if you meet the person, that's very difficult."

But while Thomas acknowledges that sometimes it's sad to reject a student, the choice is usually clear. "In the end, my job is to pick the best kids for Colby," he said.

And for the kids who aren't picked, there really is no recourse. Sometimes Thomas,

who signs most of the rejection letters, and his colleagues will hear from students Colby has denied. "I know every question, every angle they're going to work," he said. "We've never once changed a decision."

Usually students want to know what they did wrong. "And it's like, 'You didn't do anything wrong. It's a matter of competition,'" Thomas said.

Competition is stiff, but for the successful applicants—and the College—the results make all the hard work worthwhile.

"When I meet up with my friends who are Colby alums and classmates they're always so interested to hear what the new kids look like and what the applications look like and are they really as strong as they say," said Downing. "It's pretty neat to be able to report back and say, 'they're getting better and better.'"