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## Q&A: College Admissions

**Updated on Dec. 18 at 4:50 p.m.:** The first set of answers to reader questions [has been posted](#).

**Original post:** For high school seniors scrambling to complete essays, collect recommendation letters and construct well-rounded packages, college application deadlines are looming, in a seemingly inscrutable [admissions process](#).

To get an inside perspective, we solicited advice from some gatekeepers. This week, a panel of admissions deans from Yale University, Pomona College, Lawrence University and the University of Texas at Austin will answer selected reader questions.

But first they answered a set of questions from Times editors, discussing common misperceptions, [standardized tests](#), financial aid, essay writing, fairness and what not to do when trying to make a good impression.

Need more answers? Use the [form at the bottom of the page](#) to submit questions or comments. (Answers will be posted the following day.)

### The Panelists:

**Jeff Brenzel**, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at [Yale University](#) in New Haven, Conn., which in 2007 had 5,275 undergraduates and 6,083 graduate and professional students.

**Bruce Poch**, Vice President and Dean of Admissions at [Pomona College](#) in Claremont, Calif., which has an enrollment of 1,520 students.

**Steven Syverson**, Vice President for Enrollment and the Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at [Lawrence University](#) in Appleton, Wis., which has 1,429 full-time undergraduates.

**Bruce Walker**, Vice Provost and Director of Admissions at the [University of Texas at Austin](#), a public university with 11,000 graduate and 39,000 undergraduate students.

### Questions from readers (updated on Dec. 18 at 4:50 p.m.):

*As a teacher who writes 20 or so recommendations a year and tries to make each letter unique, can you offer any more information about how such letters are read? I try to present as honest an appraisal as possible but sometimes wonder if that's in the best interest of my students. Do you look for what is stated in recommendations? What's not said? After having written literally hundreds in my career, I find myself wondering if the at least 2 hours per recommendation I spend is worth it. Are there cases where recommendations will tip the balance for or against admission?*

*-Mary*

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** Recommendations play a critical role for us, and we deeply appreciate the time teachers put into writing good ones. If you teach at a school from which we receive multiple applications, the same officer will read and evaluate any recommendations you write for those applicants. If each recommendation reads about the same, with numerous positive adjectives but little in the way of concrete detail, the recommendations tend not to be helpful. We look for professional judgment from teachers,

not simply warm feelings. And we look to see whether teachers incline toward calling each bright student “one of the best I have ever taught,” or instead try to distinguish the really extraordinary individual from those who are strong in the usual ways.

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** I am grateful for fulsome teacher references and even more appreciative of those which are candid, sharing the good with the bad. Over time we sometimes get to know a teacher who has written for a number of students. A balanced reference will establish credibility for a teacher and is very helpful for our efforts.

On the other end of the spectrum is the dismay we feel when we see literally identical references written for multiple students from the same classroom. Sometimes that has even meant a telling of the same tale or moment about students who clearly are not connected. That situation reflects more poorly on the teacher than the student, and while we recognize the enormous burden reference writing does require of the author, we value and depend upon that input from someone who has worked closely with a student.

References can command even greater importance in a residential college environment where our students will live and work together. Gaining a sense of competitive or collaborative instincts and an impression of a student’s interest in engagement with peers and instructors provides important insights which can have an impact on the learning communities we are trying to build.

The length of a reference isn’t our measure of its worth.

We are also very mindful of the context of high schools. A teacher engaging 200 students per year will not likely have the time to write many pages for each of her students. When they do, we will take notice that a top student has received such a strong endorsement. A teacher in a classroom of 10 to 15 students will often write more.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** Typically, all the documents in an application tend to affirm each other, but occasionally a recommendation, essay, or interview reveals something significant about the applicant that we would not otherwise have known. In most cases, no single document “tips the balance,” but in a few cases it does. I encourage writers of recommendations not to spend time summarizing information that will be available elsewhere, but instead to focus on aspects of the student that may be known only to you because of your interactions with them. Specific anecdotes or examples that support your comments are likely to be powerful. A short recommendation that effectively highlights one specific trait, activity, or characteristic can often be the most helpful.

*Be honest: Do you really read all the essays submitted? Or, do you read only for the borderline cases?*

- Vinod

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** We do at Pomona. But some colleges use the essays as a tie breaker. And some work in a holistic review which more carefully considers the essay whether for content or writing style. In cases of a generally solid application, an essay becomes increasingly important.

In the case of an otherwise weak application, it may not take much more than a skimming of the essay to seal an impression. A brilliant essay presented in an application with substantial weakness in academic performance will not likely compensate for other concerns and could possibly lead to questions about authorship or editing influences. Essays that reflect or amplify the impression of the person created by the application as a whole are read fully and appreciated.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** At Lawrence University and other small selective liberal arts colleges, all essays and recommendations are read carefully (as is every other document the

student submits). When reading an application, we strive to gain a reasonably complete picture of the student — strengths, achievements, and aspirations, as well any particular challenges they may have overcome. Through this process, we seek to identify students who will not only be successful, academically, but who will also contribute to the vibrancy of our residential campus community through their personalities, perspectives and outside-of-class activities. Academics is foremost, but we want this to be a stimulating, engaging environment in lots of other ways, as well.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** We look at every essay from every applicant, and for students who reach the level of serious consideration, essays may end up being read multiple times.

*How do you encourage students to spend their summers? Are professional work experience or programs abroad viewed positively or can some become too gimmicky?*

- Evan

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** This was addressed well by one of my colleagues yesterday. Students should follow their passions and develop the aspects of their personalities and proficiencies that are most exciting to them, not the ones they think will best “package” them. Far too many students are spending far too much of their young lives attempting to do “what the colleges want to see in an applicant” in order to someday gain admission to some highly idealized (often hyper-selective) college. Loren Pope, one-time editor of the New York Times Education Section, who passed away earlier this year, spent much of his latter years promoting the concept that the quality of a student’s college education has more to do with the student’s engagement than with the specific college. Through books like “Beyond the Ivy League” and “Colleges That Change Lives” he argued that there are many wonderful colleges in the U.S. that offer an educational experience as good as (or better than) those at the highest profile colleges (albeit without the pedigree). The college search should focus on finding a college that is a good match for the student – not just the most selective place to which they might gain admission.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** We encourage students to make use of their summers in the way they find most interesting. If they undertake a specific program, it should be because it appeals strongly to them, not because they imagine it will look best on a resume. Why? First, it is frankly impossible to know what will look best to a particular admissions committee at a particular college. Trying to outthink or outguess the admissions committee strikes me as a useless exercise, though many book authors and private consultants purvey the illusion that they can do this for you. Second, for both education and life, the best program is the one that you find most valuable for yourself at this point in your life. We also honor and value summer jobs; for many students they are necessary and for others they can be just as important a learning experience as anything else. What’s important to us is not what you chose to do for the summer, but what you got out of it.

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** While unusual activities may add a great deal to a student’s experience and have a profound effect on their world view, for some it just comes across as decorative, not substantive. Is a special experience or summer expected or a minimum requirement? No.

Many of those “special” experiences reflect the educational and economic background of the family more than the curiosity or talent of the student. For example, I believe most admissions officers would assume it’s not fair to expect a student who works and contributes to family expenses to take an overseas internship. I confess I often wonder why some students who live in areas that have many social service needs unaddressed will ignore the local situation but move to another country to perform a similar social service. Is it really a service trip or is it a summer vacation built for college admission purposes? It may be both and that’s not a penalty point, but it isn’t a bonus consideration either. Is the student whose

family connections provided an internship at a high-profile organization more worthy than a student who delivered pizza or tended to family farm commitments? The rest of the application will give us the answer.

*It has long been understood that there are five main facets of an application: transcript, recommendations, standardized test scores, extracurriculars and essays. If a student's transcript is in the weaker half of the applicant pool, but the remaining four facets are quite exemplary, will an elite college be willing to take a chance?*

-Jonah

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** The more selective the institution, the more likely the decision for admission may turn on things not so easily quantified. If the application suggests strong basic competence academically, the other qualities of a candidate become interesting and often determine the outcome. I am interested in both where a student is at the current moment as well as making a guess about where they may be in a year or two or three. Perfect records in high school don't always suggest perfect students in college. A student who had a bump along the way may know more about how and why they learn than one who has been grinding along without a second thought. Glowing references, strong tested ability, leadership strength and a terrific interview can sometimes outweigh a transcript with a glitch or two but in highly selective environments are not likely to override a real mess of a record.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** Weaker transcripts face tough sledding in a highly selective college environment. They don't automatically disqualify a candidate for us, but you have to remember that we have many thousands of applicants with extremely strong transcripts who are also just as exemplary in the other ways that count.

*I'm a junior in New Jersey, and I feel I'm a pretty good student. Recently, a college guidance counselor emphasized that doing community service is essential, not just for the common good, but also for college admissions. How valid is this claim? Also for competitive colleges, or just colleges in general, how highly do admission officers value honors classes or AP courses (regardless of the colleges credit policy for APs)?*

-Akiva L.

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** If there are honors and AP courses available, many of us would look to see them represented in the record. We are looking for course loads that suggest a level of rigor more comparable to college work. Sometimes the more interesting class or teacher may not be teaching in the honors or AP program. Tell us why you made the course choices you did and you may convince us, too.

Anticipate the questions we are likely to ask. Lay out all the pieces you know will be part of the application that you can control (essays, activities and their presentation); make some guesses about what your recommenders will say; and emphasize and then address (before we ask) those things that may not show you in the best light and tell us what you learned that may not be reflected in the record.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** We neither privilege nor ignore community service. The thing we are looking for outside the classroom is not a series of check boxes on a resume; we're looking instead for a high level of engagement or leadership in whatever it is that the student cares about most. For some students, community service is at the forefront of their extracurriculars, in which case we pay a lot of attention to what they have accomplished in that area. For other students, some other passion or interest holds primary sway, and we evaluate the engagement in that area. We know that very few students can fully engage more than one or two primary activities at a high level. Though it is fine for a student to have varied interests, a significant number of students make the common mistake of spreading themselves too thinly in a resume-building exercise.

With respect to programs of study, we are less concerned with particular course designations and more concerned simply to see that candidates have embraced and performed well in whatever their schools offer as a most challenging program. At the same time, we are not particularly drawn to one-dimensional students who have made their sole or primary objective in life amassing the largest number of honors or AP courses conceivable, accompanied by multiple efforts to achieve the world's highest test scores.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** We seek students who have taken good advantage of their opportunities by following their passions as well as exploring new opportunities. Because of our academic rigor, though, it is important to us that students have challenged themselves academically, which probably means taking advantage of some AP classes if they are available, but does not mean taking every AP class just because it is available.

*Do you evaluate students from public and private schools differently? Does a student from a well-known private school automatically have a leg up?*

-Elizabeth

*Is the quality of an applicant's high school taken into consideration?*

-Matthew

*We live in rural Wyoming where class offerings are limited because schools cannot afford to pay teachers to teach AP classes for five kids. What advice do you have for students in rural communities who are extremely bright and motivated but do not have access to the same course selections as students in urban and suburban areas? Is there any possibility for them to apply to elite schools?*

-Sherrill Hudson

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** A well-known private school student does not automatically have a leg up everywhere. Sometimes private schools have more grade inflation than the nearby public schools. Sometimes the students at the public or parochial school had to work harder to gain resources or opportunities that were more typically available at the independent school.

Context matters in the consideration of an applicant. Even within New York City or Los Angeles, there are vastly different opportunities available to students depending on the school they attend or the resources their family may have. 4-H commitments in a rural community may be as stunning a leadership signal as volunteer work in a New York City museum.

I think many applicants and their parents would be surprised to learn about the high school origins of most admissions deans and officers, even at the most selective colleges and universities. Those alma maters are overwhelmingly public schools and often are not public schools that appear on "top 10" lists.

I would urge The New York Times to poll admissions deans about where they attended high school and whether it was public, private, parochial, rural, urban, suburban, well-supported or under-funded.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** We recognize that there are differences in high schools, although it isn't necessarily just a public-private distinction. There are both strong and weak public and private schools. In terms of academic rigor and opportunity, there are some public schools that can match even the best private school. We recognize that an 'A' at one school may indicate a different level of achievement and experience than an 'A' at another school, or even in another class. High schools send us profiles that help us to understand their particular environment. Grades are not just taken at face value; they too are context-based.

We have high regard for students who are clearly motivated and have seized available opportunities to challenge themselves within their school, even if the school's offerings are more limited. If there were a test for motivation, time-management skills, and study-skills, I would take it over any standardized test we have available. To some extent, that's what a transcript provides.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** We are always looking for students who excel in context, and we are acutely aware that context and access to resources vary widely (and wildly) across schools. Every year we get the other side of this question from those at private schools; if I had only gone to a public school in a less populated state, would I have stood out more and been treated more favorably? It is important to keep your eye on the bigger picture. If you are a high-achieving student in whatever context your circumstances have placed you, a number of strong colleges are going to be vying for you as a student. And again, ultimately it matters far less which strong college admits you than it matters what you do with your opportunities once you arrive there.

*Do they anticipate discounting more heavily as the economy worsens? Or do they hope to buck the trend among other luxury products?*

-JG

*Will the financial crisis affect your university's financial aid policy? Will you put more weight on an applicant's financial condition when considering his or her application for admission?*

-Jason Bourne

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** Pomona remains completely committed to financial aid support for our students and will remain need-blind in our consideration of applicants. We will continue to meet fully the demonstrated need of our admitted students who enroll, and we will continue to do so for the duration of their enrollment. We will do so without expecting students to assume any loan burden as part of our financial aid packages. There are a handful of colleges with similar plans and aspirations though there are many others that have financial resource challenges and may not yet know what they can afford to do next year. I have heard no outright reports of colleges cutting aid, but we do know that loan challenges will surface for some families.

I would reemphasize the importance of students and their families respecting deadlines for aid applications because the clearest way many colleges may have to control growing pressure on financial aid budgets may be to stick to those deadlines. Increasing numbers of students in recent years have delayed filing financial aid applications, sometimes because of costs and sometimes because of the paperwork. They have waited until after an offer of admission was extended. This delays getting an aid package and this year, could result in outright denial of support even for students who have need. Don't dawdle in filing!

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** The downturn has forced us to look even more seriously at our expenditures and to identify areas in which we can significantly reduce them, but at Lawrence, there is a commitment to protecting the academic and artistic integrity of the institution. So, we have not eliminated plans to fill our current faculty vacancies nor are there any plans to cut our financial aid budget.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** A family's ability to pay for a Yale education has no effect on our admission decision, and this has been true for over 40 years. Further, our president and trustees have made their first priority sustaining Yale's quite extraordinary financial aid programs. We actively recruit lower-income students to come to Yale, and this is not changing with the economic situation.

*There is a lot of controversy about using tests like the SAT and ACT in the admissions*

*process, and some top schools don't even use the scores. Other schools intend to deemphasize these tests in the admissions process in the future. Some studies have shown these tests not only to be biased against students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds but also to be a poor prediction of college success. How much do these tests really figure in the admissions process and how can you give talented poor kids a chance when so much emphasis is placed on the tests?*

*-Scott*

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** Lawrence University made the decision to go test-optional. Students who believe their ACT or SAT scores are consistent with the rest of their academic record and will represent them well in the admission process are welcome to submit their scores, whereas those who believe their test scores do not appropriately represent their academic capabilities may choose not to submit them.

In 2004, Bates College reported on 20 years as a test-optional college. They had collected SAT scores from non-submitters who ultimately enrolled and determined that, in spite of having SATs that were 160 points lower, the “non-submitters” graduated from Bates and achieved GPAs that were virtually identical to those of the “submitters.” You can read their fascinating study [here](#).

The NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling) Commission on the Use of Standardized Testing in Undergraduate Admissions recently released a report that is critical of the sometimes outright misuse and the overemphasis currently placed on these tests by our society. The entire report is available [here](#). Additional good information is available at [fairtest.org](#).

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** Colleges have a variety of testing requirements because they have found different parts of the application correlate best with success at that individual institution. Even the most selective colleges and universities use standardized tests thoughtfully and understand that they should be used in context, not as a stand-alone indicator. Grades matter. References matter. For some, test scores correlate perfectly with the rest of the application. For some, they may make little sense.

The weight assigned to test scores may vary within a college, too. A student from a comfortable background who had test prep courses and attended very strong schools may be expected to present stronger tests than a student who had fewer resources and no test prep. The dials are adjusted for all sorts of things in an application, including testing.

I urge students to look at graduation rates as one signal. Not just crude overall rates, but at graduation rates for students like themselves. Do financial aid students graduate at comparable rates to non-aided students? Do Latino students graduate at a rate comparable to the overall student body? Do students of African descent? Do student graduation rates vary by geographic origin? Do graduation rates vary much by the SAT or ACT score of enrolled students? All of this will signal that the colleges are fulfilling their commitments and are admitting students appropriately for that institution.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** We know that test scores correlate highly with socioeconomic circumstances and school resources, so we do not penalize students with fewer advantages who also have somewhat lower test scores.

*To Mr. Brenzel of Yale: What is the purpose of deferring 2,644 students in this year's round of applications? You say that the deferred student will be reevaluated in the regular application process, but seeing as your freshmen class this year had 1,892 students, there is no possible way that most of these applicants stand a chance of being accepted in addition to the 742 accepted early and the regular applicant pool yet to come. Why do you prolong the misery?*

— *Alexander*

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** This question makes two false assumptions: that being deferred is a misery and that deferred candidates have relatively poor chances of admission. Though odds of admission to Yale are always long, each year we accept about the same percentage of the students deferred from the early round as we accept of the regular decision applicants. We are often looking to see how applicants perform in the first half of senior year, when many students are taking their most challenging schedules or seeing their primary activities outside the classroom bear fruit. At the same time, we do try very hard to give final decisions to as many students as possible, where we feel certain that we will simply not be able to offer admission in the spring. This year we let over 2,100 students know that we were closing our consideration of their applications, about 38% of our early candidates. Virtually all of these applicants were very strong students, who are going to attend great colleges and have great success. We only chose not to defer them so that they could focus wholeheartedly on their other applications.

### **Questions from Times editors:**

*What part of the admissions process is most misunderstood?*

**Jeff Brenzel of Yale University:** It is not well understood that we are not aiming to pick out the best candidate in a particular school or from a particular area, as measured by some predetermined criteria. Rather, we are trying to assemble the most varied and most interesting class we can from an extremely diverse group of close to 25,000 outstanding applicants. We do not aim to compare a student primarily with other students from his or her school; we look instead for students who will bring something of particular value to the entering class.

Second, few people seem to grasp the weight given to various aspects of the application, though this can vary considerably by institution. For us at Yale, for instance, standardized test scores generally do little to differentiate applicants, because virtually all our applicants score very well. Most important to us are the transcript and the school and teacher recommendations, which students can do little to influence once it comes time for an application. We also look closely to see where and how a student has developed talents or engaged the school or community outside the classroom. Essays and interviews round out an application, and we look here mostly to see whether they convey information that enlarges or enhances, while remaining consistent with what we hear from counselors and teachers.

**Bruce Poch of Pomona College:** Most of it!

As I read admissions-related Web sites and blogs, I am often struck by the mistaken and sometimes troublesome counsel about what matters. Sometimes that advice comes from counselors, sometimes from parents of other students and sometimes from peers rather than from the individual college. Some of that bad counsel relates to questions about what to report or what to conceal.

Grades and scores, the core if not sole basis of decisions at some institutions, may be a much smaller part of an ultimate decision for students applying to a very highly selective institution where most applicants clearly enough “can do the work.” Why students chose a particular course of study may matter a great deal to an admissions officer. How they approach a classroom or learning environment may mean more than just the letter grade received in a class.

Students should objectively look at what they have submitted and ask themselves if questions remain unanswered for a reader of that application. Do the essays reflect ideas and personality or just present a report of involvement? Does it sound like the student wrote the

essay? Was a change of schools midyear explained or left to the wild imagination of an admissions officer who may read an unanswered question as a signal of danger? Why was a particular extracurricular activity the most important involvement?

**Bruce Walker of the University of Texas at Austin:** The most misunderstood part of the process is that colleges have different missions and goals when selecting a class, and that an acceptance or denial will likely be for different reasons across multiple colleges.

**Steven Syverson of Lawrence University:** We all have our own institutionally idiosyncratic ways of making admission decisions. But the common perception tends to be that all colleges are difficult to get into. The reality is that nearly 90 percent of America's four-year colleges admit more than half their applicants, and with the exception of students who apply only to hyper-selective institutions, most applicants are admitted to one or more of their top choices.

Another misconception is that colleges admit students from the top down, academically, and stop when they have filled their class. The academically outstanding applicants will likely be offered admission, but a substantial portion of the class will be filled with students who are academically qualified, but also have some other characteristic that is attractive to the college (e.g., athletic or musical talent, a parent who attended the college, or a personal or cultural background that is unusual at the college).

And, when a student is denied admission to a college, there is often the presumption that they were not qualified. At highly selective colleges, the reality is that many (perhaps most?) of the denied applicants meet the academic standards for admission, but were not offered admission simply because there was not sufficient capacity to accommodate all academically qualified candidates.

*Given that colleges need to admit a certain balance of athletes, legacies, artists, musicians and development-office selections, is it reasonable for people to expect the process to be fair?*

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** This really depends upon what is defined as fair. Colleges don't admit all their students just based upon their academic prowess. Each college strives to enroll a class that meets a number of objectives for the college — provide enough athletes to have competitive teams, provide enough musicians who play the right instruments to round out the needs of the orchestra, maintain good relations with alumni donors by enrolling their children, etc. These needs and objectives vary by college and by year. If this year we really need a bassoonist for the orchestra and a point guard for the basketball team, then bassoonists and point guards have an advantage. If next year we need a baseball pitcher and a violist, but have plenty of point guards and bassoonists, then bassoonists and point guards no longer have an advantage. It can be argued that it would be unfair to other members of the orchestra if the admissions office did not enroll a qualified bassoonist if they had the opportunity to do so.

**Mr. Walker of Texas:** We try to keep the process fair but you have identified some situations where the public believes the process is not fair. This is an extension of the question about what part of the admissions process is most misunderstood.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** Every college aims at putting together a diverse and interesting class, and colleges differ greatly in their institutional priorities. Accomplished students with high aspirations will find a welcome at a broad range and a large number of excellent colleges. Further, it matters far less exactly which of those colleges they attend than it matters how prepared they are to engage the world of opportunities available at any strong college. The fairness issue that concerns me most is not whether well-prepared students will be admitted into good colleges. In this country, they will. The real fairness question is whether poor

students have anything like an equal chance to obtain good preparation for college, not to mention access to a means for bearing the cost.

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** I reject the conclusion that some of the things on this list are quantifiable or even a “given.” At some institutions, legacy interests are specifically excluded from consideration. At some, “development-office selections” do not exist (at Pomona, for example!). At some, coaches get their picks and let the admissions offices know whom to take, and at others, the coach may simply communicate interest in an athlete but will have no direct control over the choices made by the admissions officers.

I know of no place with a specific quota on legacies, artists, musicians or any of the categories listed. In a larger university with a Division I athletic program, typically the size of the institution translates into the athlete entering without displacing the possibility of another student enrolling.

*How has the recession affected the admissions process and the availability of financial aid?*

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** This remains to be seen and there are crosscurrents and contradictory stories coming from across the country and which vary from public to private and large to small institutions. Many colleges are writing to alumni and friends reporting new assumptions for budget planning. Many apparently will freeze hiring or hold salaries to a current level or expect only very modest salary changes. Most conversations I have been privy to reflect serious concern about maintaining student access to their institutions and universities to students across the economic spectrum, whether those institutions are large or small, private or public, well endowed or more modestly endowed. Some colleges made very significant commitments to loan-free aid programs, which are being maintained this year. Many will work to ensure the continuing availability of aid even if other areas of the budget may have to be constrained.

I hope not to hear about colleges cutting need-based aid while preserving merit aid, but acknowledge that’s a personal bias, and that some may see this as a survival tool.

What does worry me is some early reporting of smaller numbers of middle- and low-income students submitting applications or submitting aid applications. I do think it will be critically important for students to submit their aid applications before deadlines this year and NOT wait until after an admission offer has been extended. In a year many colleges and universities experiencing a budget crunch, there may be nothing left at the end of an admissions cycle to actually meet their need if it has already been fully committed to those who got things in on time.

**Mr. Walker of Texas:** We are seeing higher numbers of applicants to public universities than in past years. We will not know the real impact of the recession until families have to pay a deposit and commit to a known cost.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** The support that colleges receive from their endowments is likely to decrease because the values of their endowments have dropped. This may cause some colleges to reduce the level of funding they can provide for financial aid. Other colleges may maintain their commitment to financial aid, or even increase it to assist those families who are in distress. Although it might be difficult to increase the commitment to financial aid at this time, it might be even more problematic for a college to lose enrollment. I suspect that families who can pay the full cost of education will be even more attractive to colleges now than in the past.

There are a number of plausible—and perhaps competing—impacts of these financial uncertainties. For example, it is probably prudent for private colleges (at least) to anticipate a drop in their yield rates, which will mean they need to offer admission to a larger number

of students to fill their class. At the same time, some of the private colleges, particularly less selective ones, may see an increase in applications and enrollments as a result of public institutions reducing their enrollments of new students due to cuts in funding from their states. It is likely that we will see an increase in the number of students enrolling at community colleges, though at least one state is discussing reducing its community college enrollment. Typically when the economy is bad, the number of students enrolling in college actually increases because there aren't many jobs available. It is very likely that graduate school enrollments will increase for the same reason. And colleges that offer programs to retrain workers who have been displaced from their jobs are likely to see demand for those programs burgeon.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** Thankfully, it has not affected us at Yale, and President Richard Levin has just reaffirmed in an open letter to the Yale community that preserving our extraordinary financial aid initiatives is our first priority for the immediate future.

*In an environment where so many applicants have good grades and test scores, what's the most innovative thing an applicant has done to be appealingly memorable?*

**Mr. Walker of Texas:** Students are being told (my perception that it is mostly by hired counselors) that they need to do something to stand out in the applicant pool. Clever promotional gimmicks will be talked about around the office but seldom, if ever, will the clever promotional gimmick be why a student gets admitted. The best self-promotion is to be an outstanding student.

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** What works best is what best and most fully and consistently represents the applicant. Tricks that don't fit the person end up looking like gimmicks, without real substance. The student who years ago sent in a life-size doll who was her "best friend," equipped with a recorded endorsement of the applicant, left the admissions staff feeling like it was in a Twilight Zone episode. Creepy. Don't send brownies, T-shirts or love notes. Just write a good application, choose recommenders well, write a thoughtful, personality-infused essay and if an interview is offered, do it.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** I resist answering this question directly, because many of us are striving to help make the college search and admission process less stressful for students. Every year the media publish some amusing stories about unusual strategies employed by individual applicants, but I fear this prompts more students to believe that doing some bizarre thing is an appropriate strategy to gain admission to their favored college. We should avoid encouraging that behavior.

**Jeff Brenzel of Yale University:** We're much less interested in innovative applications than we are in innovative students, who have shown over time the spark of real intellectual curiosity and a real enthusiasm for engaging with peers, schools and communities.

*How have you seen applicants shoot themselves in the foot?*

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** Few of our applicants shoot themselves in the foot. What concerns me more are the number of high achieving students whose lives are governed by what they, or perhaps more often their parents, imagine is going to improve in some slight way their chances of admission to this or that particular school. Exploration and growth serve a student best for the long run, both in education and life, not the construction of a perfect resume. We try as best we can to distinguish the one from the other.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** It is reasonably common for students to try to impress us with how much they love our particular college, by incorporating a mention of our college into their essay. (For example: "For the past four years, every time I was ready to give up on math, the thought of gaining admission to Lawrence University inspired me to redouble my

efforts.”) But it is also a not-infrequent experience for them to forget to replace all the mentions of some other college in their essay. Though I doubt that many students are denied admission over such a faux pas, the current ability to “cut and paste” so easily can sometimes come back to haunt students.

It is also particularly imprudent to plagiarize an application essay.

But the most frequent form of self-inflicted damage is careless preparation of the application. In the days of handwritten applications, it might have been poor handwriting. Currently it is simply that they waited until the deadline to finish their essay and complete the remainder of their application, so they are hurried and don’t proofread carefully. A poorly presented application can, in fact, have a negative affect on the admission decision.

**Mr. Walker of Texas:** By creating inconsistencies within the application file. When students attempt to make themselves sound better than they are, the admission officer has to wonder where else the student has stretched the truth.

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** See my answer to the previous question!

*Do you have any way of getting beyond the persona that a student presents, on paper or in an interview?*

**Mr. Walker of Texas:** A public flagship university with a large applicant pool, and limited time, rarely has the opportunity to get beyond the surface with an applicant’s persona. But there will be opportunities for getting to know the student better, such as scholarship competitions, on campus interviews, etc., that can help with this problem.

**Mr. Brenzel of Yale:** All aspects of the application say something to us. We try to add those things together to see whether we can picture a real, living person, with interesting talents and authentic interests. The information we have is imperfect, our judgments are imperfect, and the time we can spend on evaluation is short. But the process works well enough in general that the great majority of talented, hard-working students find a college where they can thrive.

**Mr. Poch of Pomona:** A complete application really does reveal a pretty full picture which does penetrate a manufactured persona. If teachers describe what a student is like in their classroom rather than just reporting the grade the student received, we may well get a glimpse into a student’s learning style or how they have used and contributed to a classroom. If a student provides a multi-page resume of activities and the teachers barely mention any of the leadership claimed in the activity roster, surely that may raise a question about actual involvement. Transcript performance will be reflected in teacher comments, too. Interviews likely will pick up on themes in the application and may amplify “why” a student has chosen some paths rather than just repeating “what” is on the list. It should all come together.

**Mr. Syverson of Lawrence:** We do get beyond the persona that a student presents, but we’re not interested in digging into Facebook to do so.