

Get Your Kid Into Harvard

Or not. Thanks to a huge increase in the number of college-bound kids, it takes a lot more than great grades and spectacular SAT scores to get into the best schools. Here's what today's students (and their parents) are up against. By Sara Doran

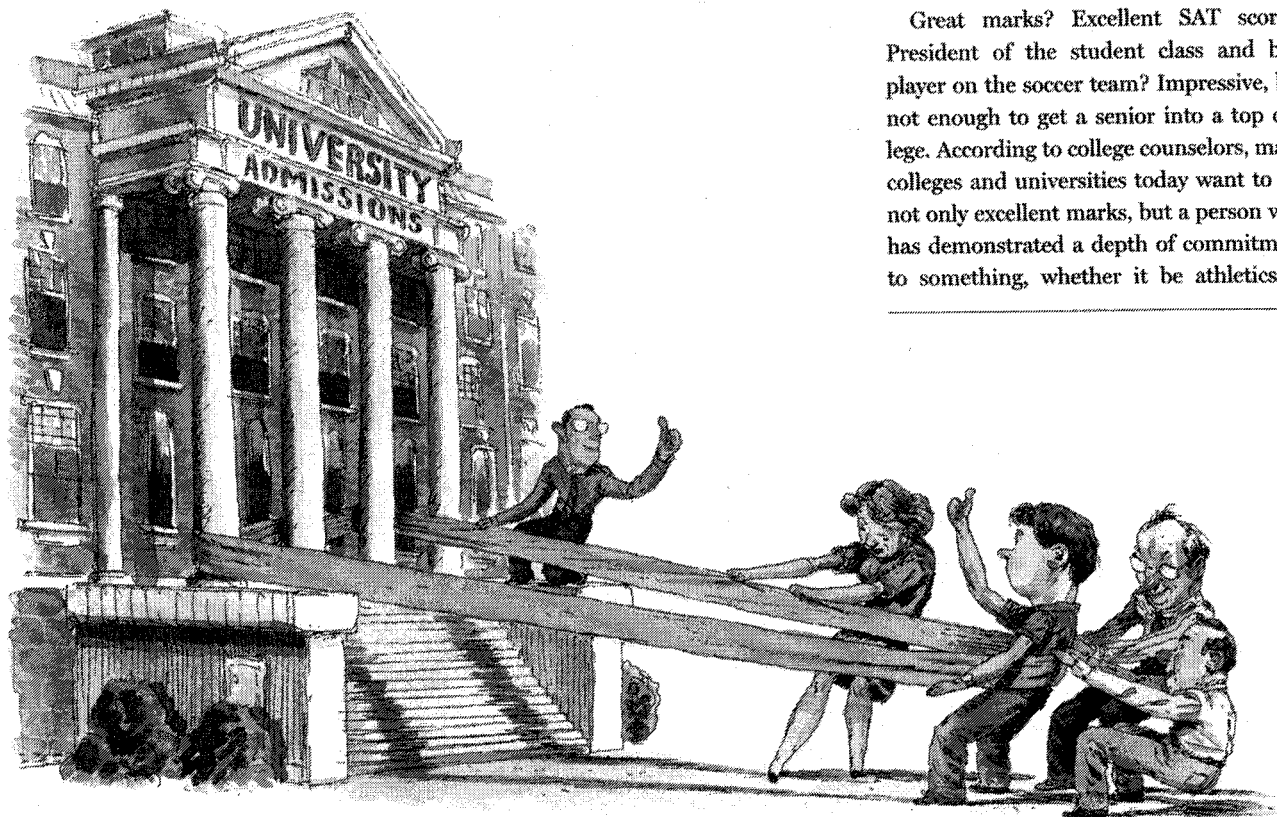
LOOKING AT IT now, Janet R. says it must have been temporary insanity that drove her to sit down and try to write her daughter's college-application essay. This affluent, and usually honest, Los Angeles mother was in such a frenzy over whether her daughter would be admitted to a school — and worried because she didn't think her daughter's essay was good enough — that she banged out an essay of her own. Luckily for Janet, her daughter was outraged at the fakery, and Mom ashamedly slinked out of the room. The private college consultant they were working with laughed at the story — then told Janet that the essay she had written was terrible and would not have cut it with college admissions officers. "I was so nuts over the whole process that I panicked," Janet says nervously. "But ironically, in

the end, it turns out I would not have gotten into college anyway."

Sure, Janet went over the edge, but she is hardly alone in her anxiety. Throughout the country, mothers and fathers of high-school students are struggling to decipher what has become nothing less than a tortuous process: applying to colleges. "Most parents are confused because the process has changed so much since they went to school," says Stephanie Meade, president of the Collegiate Edge, a tutoring and educational consulting service. "They feel helpless and scared. [They] want what's best for their kids. The tricky part is figuring out the definition of *best*."

While the country's 3,600 colleges and universities have the openings they have always had, the applicant pool is overflowing with the now-grown babies of boomers. As a result, the number of college applications filed has increased 18 percent over the last decade, which means that competition is fiercer than ever.

Great marks? Excellent SAT scores? President of the student class and best player on the soccer team? Impressive, but not enough to get a senior into a top college. According to college counselors, many colleges and universities today want to see not only excellent marks, but a person who has demonstrated a depth of commitment to something, whether it be athletics or



art. "We want students who are passionate and have really invested themselves," says Tom Marlitt, an admissions officer for Sarah Lawrence, an elite liberal arts college of 1,100 students in Bronxville, New York. "We're not usually interested in a student who has signed up for many extracurricular activities that mean nothing to them. It doesn't have to be an organized activity, but

we want someone who has a real interest in what they're doing and is pursuing it on their own."

That's a tall order for most seniors who, at age 17 or so, have hardly learned how to cope with acne, much less follow their bliss. Nonetheless, the pressure is on, and getting into college has never been tougher. In fact, many of the schools that were con-

sidered "safe" back in the 1970s — when parents of today's seniors were applying — such as the University of Miami and Boston University, are now first choices for some of the best and the brightest. "I would not get into Stanford University today with the credentials that got me in 30 years ago," laughs Meade. "So you have a huge panic because the applicant quality pool has increased."

And schools like Harvard and Yale? Well,

Hot Colleges

While the so-called "Ivys" remain the gold standard among the most high-achieving seniors, each year there is a list of schools that seem to appear on the radar screens of students. According to a number of private college consultants, Yale and Stanford seem to be especially popular this year. Brown University, which has been considered a "hot" college for about the past five years and was the subject of a *Vanity Fair* story a few years ago, also remains high on the list of seniors aiming for the top. The WB's hit series *Felicity* threw a spotlight on New York University, especially for California students eager to get a taste of the big city.

Among small liberal arts colleges, Kenyon College and Bard are rating high, although Bard is regarded as a decidedly progressive school for artier types. The University of Southern California in downtown L.A. is on fire this year because, some consultants believe, it is a campus school within the confines of a large city. Washington University in St. Louis is also extremely desirable. "It's regarded as strong academically and comfortable socially," says one college consultant. "It's a nice size and people feel it's more approachable than the Ivys."

Seniors seem to be gravitating toward schools that are situated near urban areas but have spirit. Fraternities and football are rating high, and the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin are attracting college-bound seniors who want a big school with lots of spirit. Tufts University outside of Boston is also big this year. In the South, Duke University remains a favorite. And the University of Miami, once regarded as a party school, is now considered excellent for its film and musical theater program.

getting into Harvard these days is tantamount to winning a Nobel Peace Prize. While they have always been the gold standard, admission to Ivy League schools today requires exceptional grades and SAT scores, and a commitment to something else. A 4.2 average and 1600 on the college boards, believe it or not, is not enough. "They want a student to bring something exceptional to the table," says one college consultant. "But most parents are more realistic. They realize that Harvard or Yale is not going to happen for their child."

Responding to the pressure, a cottage industry has arisen in recent years that offers parents a full range of college prep services, from SAT tutoring, which has been around a long time, and essay writing to selection of the schools to apply to and even planning trips to visit them. Starting in a student's sophomore or junior year, a private educational consultant, whose charges range from a reasonable hourly rate to tens of thousands of dollars, will sit down and lay out a strategy. "Our business is booming," says Suzanne Rubenstein, a partner in College Circuit, a Los Angeles educational consulting firm that guides students and their parents through the application process. "Children of the baby boomers are applying to college, and there are an awful lot of them. In most selective colleges, there are no more spaces or dorm rooms than there were 10 years ago."

But how necessary are these private college consultants? In many public and private schools, college counselors can still provide seniors with excellent guidance in the college process. But overcrowded public schools can often leave a beleaguered college counselor handling 500 college-bound high-school seniors. "If a student is inadmissible in a college pool and doesn't qualify, a private counselor can't turn that person around," says Sarah Lawrence's Marlitt. "But certainly where they are competitive, it can give them a leg up."

The process of applying to colleges with the help of a private consultant typically begins when a student and his or her parents discuss what courses he or she should be taking for the next few years that will serve them well when it comes time to apply. They

start building the right academic profile. For example, the advanced-placement college courses and curriculum a high schooler takes are very important. The goal is for a student to be taking at least five academic subjects each semester and pushing the envelope. "The most selective colleges are looking to see if you are taking the rigorous courses offered at your school," says Meade. "They

want to see kids challenging themselves academically."

Consultants also help students plan summer jobs or find programs that will look good on a college application. Hanging out at the local swim club? Forget it. A student should have several consecutive summers doing work that reflects his or her passion, whether teaching underprivileged

kids how to swim or working in the local library. Interestingly, although attending a university summer-study program can be fun, it doesn't really wow college admissions officers unless they are programs that are competitive to get into. Rubenstein, a mother who became fascinated with college counseling after her child went through the process, advises programs that are selec-

tive and require application, such as science research, history, or writing programs at various colleges and universities. Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Kenyon College, and Stanford University also offer selective summer creative arts programs.

Ultimately, colleges are looking to put together the most diverse and eclectic class

they can, one that will make them look good. Of course, "Every class needs a top, middle, and bottom," says Meade. "That means they can't only take people at the top of their classes."

When it comes to community service, which is a trend in education nationwide, colleges are often leery. While a month of community service in the Fiji Islands — including two weeks building huts and the other two traveling around — makes for a great summer experience, it does not rate up there with college admissions officers. They tend to be more impressed with a student whose community service consists of spending a summer working in the inner city to help underprivileged kids.

Colleges also like to see leadership, someone who shows initiative. Small liberal arts colleges, for example, want students who will come to campus and become involved. "Ten years ago, everyone was supposed to be well-rounded," says one private consultant. "Now colleges want the 'angular student,' a student who is very focused in one area and will create a freshman class that is a bunch of angled students who come together in one interesting, disparate way."

The good news for high-school seniors and their parents is that school guidance counselors and private consultants all agree that there is such a range of colleges and universities in the United States that every student can find an environment that feels like a good fit. "The key is finding the right match," says Terry Kung, codirector of college counseling at the Oakwood School, a private school in North Hollywood, California.

Meanwhile, Janet R. is now leaving the application process solely up to her daughter and the private college consultant. Her daughter completed 10 college applications and wrote what the consultant considered an excellent essay — by herself. She visited a number of schools throughout the country — and even let her mother tag along — and has decided that her first choice is a small liberal arts college back East. And now starts the waiting game. But Janet says her daughter is relieved to be done with college applications, and even Janet has breathed a sigh of relief. **EW**

SARA DORAN is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.