

A+ Options For 'B' Kids

By Anne Mcgrath

Dave Brown got a slow start at his high school in Emmaus, Pa., and the evidence was clear on his college applications: mostly C's for four years of German, junior-year grades in physics that faded from A to FF ("for under 55 percent"), and a spot at No. 160 in a class of 470. But admissions staffers at nearby Ursinus College detected intriguing possibilities in Brown's transformation from a 2.0 freshman focused on playing pool and customizing his car into a determined senior managing A's and B's in several honors courses. And they were right. Under the guidance of Ursinus's demanding but accessible professors, Brown wrapped up his undergraduate studies with a 3.56 average. In May, he graduated from the University of Miami law school, where he earned his J.D. degree on a full scholarship.

Today's teenagers with less-than-dazzling records might counter, "Sure, but that was then. What are my chances at a good school *now* ?" It's undeniable that the college quest has lately become much more competitive for many students; indeed, the country's best-known institutions are turning away ever larger hordes of qualified applicants. Straight-B kids who have watched A-plus schoolmates collect rejections often assume, not surprisingly, that their only choice will be open-door State U. But that's a perception that drives college counselors crazy. "America is loaded with wonderful colleges with wonderful professors," insists Joyce Slayton Mitchell, director of college advising at Nightingale-Bamford School in New York and author of *Winning the Heart of the College Admissions Dean* (Ten Speed Press, \$14.95). "There's no reason for [these kids] to think they won't get into a good college. They can and they will." (Assuming any slacker tendencies have been overcome.)

Admissions deans, too, want to get the message out: Determined B students who choose thoughtfully and apply with care can count on having plenty of fine choices, period. "There are vast numbers of students who fall a bit below our academic profile but are tenacious and persistent and well-prepared to succeed. We want to be sure they're at our table, too," says Karen Foust, vice president for enrollment at Hendrix College in Arkansas, which, like all of the college-counselor favorites mentioned in this piece, fares quite respectably in *U.S. News*'s rankings. Some 30 percent of last year's freshman class arrived with grade-point averages between 2.5 and 3.5. Adds Scott Friedhoff, vice president for enrollment at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania: "I can think of any number of us who would be glad to accept most of our strong B applicants with combined verbal and math SAT scores of 1150."

Why the mismatch between perception and reality? Much of the noise about how tough it is to get into college results from too much pounding on the same few doors. Princeton, whose applicant pool for this fall grew by 21 percent, was forced to deny the vast majority of the more than 5,000 kids with perfect 4.0 averages, for example; Duke turned away 59 percent of the high school valedictorians who applied. "We've just become so brand conscious--'If I haven't heard of it, it can't be any good,' " laments Terence Giffen, director of college counseling at Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, who stresses that all kids are far more likely to thrive in college if they ignore prestige and look for a good fit. "I can say 'Grinnell' over and over all day long, and here in Nashville eyes roll back in the head."

Beyond the small roster of nationally renowned schools lie many colleges--like Iowa's Grinnell--that aren't necessarily household names but have first-rate programs (and strong reputations among those in the know). Marty Strelecky, a Seattle father whose first two children went off to college nearly a decade ago and whose youngest, Marianne, applied last year, found the whole process to be "so turbocharged" this time around that he unloaded some of the stress by hiring a counselor to come up with a realistic list of some of those schools. "You think everybody's kid's going to Harvard but your kid," he says. "I think people have gone nutso. There's a lot of us who are just happy our kids are going to school."

"Expand your horizons." Marianne, a solid B student with average SAT scores of around 1000, admits to being "a little upset at first" that she hadn't heard of most of the schools on the counselor's list. She applied to six, was accepted by four, and had a very happy freshman year at the University of Redlands in California, where her classes were small and professors regularly handed out their home telephone numbers. "Expand your horizons when you look," she advises applicants now. (Her father would add some counsel for their mothers and fathers: "Tune out all the comments from other parents.")

It's one thing, though, to figure out which great colleges you'd like to attend and quite another to determine which ones might accept you. The breakdown of how many kids arrived from the top of their high school class--along with test scores of the current freshmen, expressed as the "25th to 75th percentile" --can help you figure out if you are looking at a long shot, a good shot, or a place where you'll seem so accomplished you might land a merit scholarship. Fully 67 percent of last year's freshmen at Southern Methodist University in Texas were from the top quarter of their high school class, for example. The school's 1100-to-1300 SAT range means that half of the freshmen scored between those end points, one quarter scored lower, and one quarter scored higher. (The scores reported in these pages are for the last class to have taken the old SAT with its 1600 maximum score. You can use your combined scores on the critical reading and math sections of the new 2400 test to gauge how well you fit a school's profile.)

Grade-point averages are a little harder to figure out. The mean GPA s that colleges publish for their current freshmen often reflect some sort of weighting system that, for example, turns a B in an honors or Advanced Placement class into an A. Some colleges calculate their own weighted GPA for each applicant, stripping out all nonacademic courses. Others take whatever GPA high schools offer and crunch all the numbers together when calculating their classwide average. "The 4.8, the 5.0--everything is thrown in," explains Barbara Gill, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of Maryland-College Park, which reported a mean GPA of 3.85 for last fall's entering class. Most admissions officers will be happy to explain to you how they run the numbers.

Even if your test scores and recalculated GPA don't fit the school's profile, you may still have a chance. Gill and her staff use a list of 25 factors to judge applicants, including community service, special talents, leadership ability, and socioeconomic background. About 20 percent of last year's freshmen arrived with GPA s between 2.5 and 3.5. "I'm hearing people say, 'I looked at the profile of the class, and I ruled it out,' " says Susan Klopman, dean of admissions and financial planning at Elon University in North Carolina, where the most recent freshman class averaged a weighted 3.6. "I might be very interested in a 3.2 student! I always tell parents, 'Let us make the admissions decisions.' " Of the 1,232 freshmen who arrived last fall, 482 had GPA s of 2.5 to 3.5.

The encouraging reality? The vast majority of colleges and universities accept more than half of the people who apply. And it's a big mistake to equate selectivity with quality, says Loren Pope, author of *Colleges That Change Lives* (\$15, Penguin Books), who takes issue with the *U.S. News* rankings' use of acceptance rate and student qualifications as components of a school's educational caliber. With rare exceptions, the 40 colleges he features--for their faculty contact with students and commitment to teaching people of varied abilities, strong sense of community, and an intellectual climate that produces a disproportionate share of budding Ph.D.'s--accept most of their applicants. Among his picks: Hendrix and Allegheny; Beloit College and Lawrence University in Wisconsin; Kalamazoo in Michigan; McDaniel in Maryland; Whitman and Evergreen State in Washington; Austin College in Texas; the College of Wooster in Ohio, and Ursinus--the school that sensed potential in Dave Brown.

Applications tend to pour in as reputations spread, of course. The University of Redlands has seen a 42 percent jump in the number of applicants over the past six years, to nearly 3,400

for a class of about 620 this fall; Lawrence's pool has grown by about 52 percent since 1999. So it's vital to tackle your college search thoughtfully. collegees and test scores aren't your strengths? You need to figure out where your talents do lie, find schools that will appreciate them, and showcase your special abilities in your application and in person. Here's how:

FIND THE RIGHT FIT

Choosing well should be the goal of every applicant, but it's a critical task for anyone who might have trouble with the transition to college-level work. Will you perform best at a big university, taking lots of lecture classes and sampling from a menu of 600 clubs? Or will you blossom in the close community of a liberal arts college, where the typical small class requires you to speak up and discuss? Will you be up to the academic demands you'll face? If not, and you're accepted, your studies may feel like a constant struggle. Are you a drama buff? A debater? "If I have an average student who's passionate about music, I want him to go someplace where he can be *immediately* involved in music," says Susan Tree, a college counselor at the Westtown School in Westtown, Pa. Without that area of certain success, Tree says, the danger increases that he'll wash out.

Many counselors steer nonsuperstars toward small liberal arts colleges, unless the student has his heart set on the Big Ten experience. "The amount of faculty contact is really important for students who haven't been highfliers," says Judith Mackenzie, the Seattle educational consultant who worked with the Strelecky family. "They need support." Too often at large research universities, counselors caution, freshman classes are taught by graduate assistants, and young undergrads rarely see the scholars. "At a small college like Kalamazoo," says Pope, professors "might be your intramural teammates."

Katie Pesce knew that she would need faculty contact--one reason she chose Elon. Now a senior studying elementary education, she recalls she "worked 10 times harder than everyone else" at her New Jersey high school and would "always, always go in for help." At Elon, former professors often stop her on campus to say hello, she says, and "I go see my photography professor all the time to chat about pieces of work, what I might want to do in the future with photography--anything."

Strategically speaking, focusing your search on schools that are a good fit--and making it clear you've done the research to *know* they're a good fit--can sometimes improve the odds that the committee will say "this is a kid we want." Likewise, failing to do your research can hurt. "We ask a very specific question about how Flagler meets your goals," says Marc Williar, director of admissions at the Florida college. One applicant to the sports management program wrote about wanting to become a personal trainer. "This is a business-oriented program; we don't turn out personal trainers," Williar says. Although the student looked great on paper, she was denied admission.

LOOK FOR STRONG SUPPORTS

Once you move on to the detailed research, many counselors suggest looking for a program that bonds freshmen tightly with a professor and a peer group, and for well-developed advising and retention systems. "You want to build a foundation for success," says George Kuh, the Indiana University researcher who runs the National Survey of Student Engagement to help colleges gauge how effectively they're serving undergrads. Shirley Bloomquist, an independent counselor in Great Falls, Va., urges clients to consider how many kids return for sophomore year. "I like to see at least an 85 percent return rate," she says. "If it's under 65 percent, something's going wrong."

To make sure their freshmen adjust smoothly and stay, a growing number of colleges and universities hold elaborate orientations that introduce newcomers to each other over the summer, then put them through a College 101 course in the fall on everything from managing their time to managing their drinking. At Lawrence and Ursinus, as at a growing number of

schools big and small, the whole class is divided into small seminars to tackle the same readings (story, Page 52), so discussions often continue over lunch and in the dorms. Westminster College in Salt Lake City is refining a plan to divide all freshmen into "learning communities" of about 30 students, who will study together in at least two themed classes--on globalism, say, or the environment.

Too often, academic advising tends to be spotty until a student has declared a major. "But these kids desperately need some guidance!" says Mackenzie. At a number of schools with freshman seminars, including the College of Wooster, Allegheny, and the University of Redlands, the seminar prof doubles as each participant's adviser, offering academic and moral support as well as classroom instruction.

One advantage of a system in which adults know undergrads well is that alarms go off when a student's grades drop or someone stops coming to class. At Hendrix and at Otterbein College in Ohio, for example, professors and resident assistants alert a retention committee when someone seems to be slipping, and the committee meets regularly to talk about how best to intervene with struggling students. "This is a place where you're not going to go unnoticed," says Cass Johnson, Otterbein's admissions director.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR GRADES

By itself, a 3.5 GPA won't count for much. It might just prove that you've taken easy courses. What's critical to the people deciding your fate is that given your abilities, you've pursued the most challenging possible curriculum and have (mostly) succeeded.

The admissions officers will pore over your transcript to see what you've studied. They'll compare your core academic courses--English, math, science, social studies, and foreign language--with the profile of your high school's offerings that your counselor will send them. "We're looking for signs of ambition academically; someone who has just taken run-of-the-mill courses might not be ready for the challenge here," says Bob Nesmith, associate director of admission at Centre College in Kentucky, which has become more of a reach for many B students as applications have shot up in recent years. "You don't necessarily have to be taking AP s," says Mitchell. "But it's important to take the next step."

Obviously, it's better to have A's and B's than C's, but think carefully before dropping down from an AP or honors course to an easier class. On the one hand, a transcript smattered with C's may scream that you aren't ready for college material. On the other, "there's a huge difference between a C plus in AP calculus and in geometry," says Mark Anderson, dean of admission at Gustavus Adolphus, a liberal arts college in Minnesota that brought in 33 percent of its last freshman class from the 2.9-to-3.5 range. For kids with C's, the trend line is more telling than the bottom line. "No two 3.0s are alike," says Flagler's Williar. "A 3.3 that goes to a 3.0 to a 2.6 is not as good as the reverse."

This is where senior year comes in. "Senior-year January grades can be key for marginal kids," says Barbara Weintraub, the college and career adviser at James Hubert Blake High School in Silver Spring, Md. Missy Sanchez, a counselor at Woodward Academy in College Park, Ga., recalls one girl who fell in love with the University of Denver but cried after her visit because she knew her 2.3 GPA wouldn't get her in. She managed to bring her grades up with a 3.2 spring semester junior year and applied early decision. She was deferred, pulled off a 3.5 first semester senior year, and got in.

Will your performance be judged more leniently if you apply early decision? Some schools take in a higher proportion of their early-decision pool than of their regular applicants; at Wooster, for instance, 87 percent of early applicants got in last year compared with 72 percent of the non-early group. In part, such differences reflect the fact that early applicants are often highly capable students. But they also indicate a preference for kids so enthusiastic about the school they've already bought a sweatshirt, even if they're not obvious "ins" based on performance.

But the weaker your academic record, the more you'll need to make of senior year and the more likely you'll be deferred into the regular pool, anyway. A school with rolling admissions--decisions are made as applications are received until the class is full--is another story. There, by throwing your hat in the ring early, you might impress the committee with your interest and initiative and possibly nab a spot when there are still lots of openings--or at least get an early read on where repair work is called for. "If we don't see your record until spring of senior year, you won't have time to fix it," says Otterbein's Johnson.

BE UPFRONT ABOUT YOUR FAILINGS

One mistake that insecure applicants often make is keeping mum about flaws in their record in the hopes that they won't be noticed. It's far better to acknowledge them and take responsibility. "We're going to see those grades--they're the big pink elephant in the room. So let's hit it head on rather than just focus on what looks good," says Douglas Christiansen, dean of admissions at Purdue University in Indiana. "In 20 years, the most refreshing attribute I've seen [in applicants] is the recognition of their successes and failures. Discuss your bad grade and what you need to do about it. Get a tutor? Drop an activity? I'm looking for the ability to be successful, and part of that is the ability to recognize your shortcomings and fix them."

Frankness worked for DiAndra Thompson. "I let [the admissions officer] know my SAT scores were not the best--he probably already knew it, but I just put it right out there," says the rising junior of her interview at Ursinus two years ago, when she applied with a respectable 3.5 from St. Catharine Academy in the Bronx and scores of only 980. "And I said, 'But I really work hard and am a good student.' " Her candor, along with the supporting evidence on her transcript and an impressive record of service that included four years of Saturdays at a center for children whose parents have AIDS, got her the nod.

It's fine to describe obstacles that have caused you to stumble in your interview or personal statement, as long as you don't whine. "The worst thing you can do is make it sound like someone else's fault," says Friedhoff. "Don't say 'It was the teacher.' Say, 'I had some challenges--I didn't know how to do well with her different style.' " Judi Robinovitz, an educational consultant in Boca Raton, Fla., whose own son, now an attorney, applied to college having struggled with learning disabilities, advises "100 percent" honesty about learning issues you've faced--"not in a 'woe is me' way, but to show how you have become successful."

PAINT A PICTURE OF AN INTERESTING PERSON

Your personal statement ought to demonstrate that you *do* have intellectual prowess, right? That's what too many applicants think--thus the surfeit of dronings-on about global warming and the war in Iraq.

Actually, your best shot is to show admissions that you've got something special to contribute to life on campus. A far better tactic than grappling with a Big Idea is to zoom in on your small world and describe an experience that has formed you or illustrates your creativity, say, or a quality that makes you unique.

Staffers at the College of Wooster recall one essay by a boy who likened his exploration of the streets of his city to Huckleberry Finn's travels. Hannah McLafferty, an Allegheny sophomore, wrote about her struggle with dyslexia, theorizing that the skills she had developed to master reading English helped her learn Spanish with relatively little trouble, contributing to an "amazing" seven months as an exchange student in Chile. Marianne Strelecky, long a member of an outdoor program, described a "life changing" expedition that she participated in for a deaf and hard-of-hearing group; she taught survival skills--and learned the art of communicating without words.

The most effective letters of recommendation, too, will convey your spirit and gumption if they can't wax poetic about your grades. It may seem logical to seek a letter from the geometry teacher who gave you an A in ninth grade, since your math grades have never been as good since. But you might be much better served by the calculus teacher who watched you wrestle a D up to a B. "Instead of going for the easy rec, go to the teacher who has really seen you sweat," suggests Tree.

While you might be tempted to define yourself by the sheer number of your extracurricular activities, most colleges now want well-rounded classes of well-focused people. "Go for quality," advises Jim Bekkering, vice president for admissions at Hope College in Michigan, another Pope favorite. "A two-page list of memberships is not as significant as two activities that make a difference in people's lives." One thing that grabbed Elon staffers about Katie Pesce's application was the convincing portrait it painted of a committed citizen leader: She had founded and led a chapter of an antismoking organization at her school, served in student government, and spent every Christmas Eve from middle school forward soliciting poinsettias from a local greenhouse and taking them to people stuck in the hospital. Ron Moss, SMU's admissions dean, purposefully looks for people who are following their passions to become their "best self." He recalls admitting one young man, for example, "whose seven lines of extracurriculars all had the word 'math' in them" and whose essay evoked the thrill of math competitions.

SHOW YOU CARE

Colleges prefer to invite people they think will actually come; they'll increase their yield (the proportion of admitted students who end up enrolling), which makes them appear more attractive and keeps the costs of recruiting down. But now that so many kids send out 10 or 12 applications, admissions staffers often find it tough to identify the sure bets. A growing number of colleges are apt to count your every phone call and visit. At Gustavus Adolphus, a printout sits at the front of each applicant's file showing each returned postcard, E-mail or phone query, college-fair chat, talk with a high school rep, and campus visit. "If there's nothing," says Anderson, "that says this person's just sending out another electronic application." A recent survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling found that nearly 55 percent of colleges and universities now consider "demonstrated interest" when making admissions decisions.

The nonserious applicant won't ask for an interview--so ask. "If an average student can look a counselor in the eye and say, 'This is the college for me, and here's why, and here's how I can contribute'--that sends a powerful message," says Friedhoff.

Finally, keep in mind that every college you apply to will expect your most careful effort. Tree remembers one student who was so confident of being accepted by a small college in Maryland that the family didn't make the trip there for an interview, nor did the student stop in to see the college rep who visited school. Admissions called, wondering about seriousness of purpose, and the family headed for campus pronto. Even at schools that seem like safe bets, you've got to work hard to get in.