

The College Admissions Game Some Top Students Look for Hidden-Gem Colleges

by Margot Adler

This is the first report in a seven-part series.

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Abigail Wetzel, prep school senior

Morning Edition, February 22, 2007 · Although colleges typically accept more than two-thirds of their applicants — and two-thirds of students get into their first-choice school — admissions anxiety around a small group of highly selective colleges is more intense than ever. Students shoot for those schools because of what they hear from their parents and friends, and what they read in ranking systems by organizations such as *U.S. News and World Report* and the Princeton Review.

The media are full of stories about the college-admissions frenzy. Over the last year, best-selling books such as *The Gatekeepers* and *The Overachievers* have added to the sense of panic.

But there are still many students who have chosen not to get caught up in the frenzy. They are marching to a different drummer and choosing colleges with different profiles.

Searching for More Than a High Ranking

Abigail Wetzel is a senior at the Loomis Chaffee School, a highly regarded prep school in Windsor, Conn. Most of her friends applied early to Columbia, Brown, Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Georgetown and Cornell.

"A lot of students at my school will apply to a bunch of schools and then go to the one that is the best one on their list," she says.

When you ask her what her friends mean by "best," she says "highest ranked." Wetzel says that many people at her school put image before learning. But she says she's looking for a place that is more intellectual, one that puts learning above getting "good grades, so you can apply for a high-influence job based on the name of the school you went to."

Many of her friends, she says, keep on telling her that she should apply to "better schools."

Wetzel has been particularly impressed by Whitman College in Washington state and Cornell College in Iowa. Wetzel knows she eventually wants to be a doctor. But she believes that "the name of the school you go to is not going to decide how happy you are for the rest of your life."

"What's important is how much you put into the college you go to," she says.

Making Choices Based on Who You Are

At Loomis Chaffee, Wetzel feels somewhat out of step in taking the position she has. At the Putney School, a boarding school in Vermont, many students see the college search the way she does. Putney is an unusual school, where students work on a farm, perform community service and pursue a rigorous program in academics, sports and the arts.

Jennifer DesMaisons is the college adviser for the Putney School. She says she wants to help her students "find what kind of educational setting would be the best for them, instead of just picking a name that would follow in the family line or be the best on their resume."

DesMaisons holds a 12-session class on college admissions for juniors. At the first class, she tells them that it is important to think about "your own identity, not only what you want to study, but what kind of people you want to be surrounded by. What kinds of dinner table conversations do you want to have?"

It is important to make choices based on your own identity, not on what your friends or you parents say, she adds.

One of DesMaisons' students is Luka Negoita. He says he wants to pursue environmental studies and is looking at a small college in Vermont, and another in Arizona. The colleges to which he is applying either don't require the SAT, or consider it a very small part of what they look at.

Looking at Less Well-Known Schools

Alison Selking is facing the same issues at Heidelberg High School in Heidelberg, Germany. Her father is in the U.S. Army and is currently serving in Iraq. Like Abigail Wetzel at Loomis Chaffee, Selking has great grades and SAT scores, but she is also looking at colleges you might not expect. She says that some of the most prestigious colleges seem competitive in ways she doesn't really like.

"I am a very competitive person with myself," Selking says. "I want to do better than I have done in the past, but I don't like being better than other people. I want to be in a supportive environment."

Selking was particularly impressed with Hendrix College in Arkansas. She met scores of students, whereas at other schools, sometimes the only student she talked to was the tour guide. She advises students who are about to enter the college admissions frenzy not to base their decisions on how many people have heard of a school or how prestigious it is.

"Just because nobody knows about it, doesn't mean it isn't a great school and isn't the best place for you," she says.

A number of college presidents and deans agree with Selking and Wetzel. Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, says it doesn't matter where you go to college, only "what you do there." Botstein says American colleges and universities are among the best in the world.

"College is a chance to really make something of yourself," he says. "And you can do that anywhere, at a state university campus, or in a not well-known, small- or medium-size private institution."