

Be prepared: Competition to get into colleges may be intensifying

BY GENE TRAINOR
MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

People seeking new skills in a slow economy and a near record number of high school seniors are expected to make the competition fierce for coveted spots in U.S. colleges and universities in the fall.

Applications to elite private schools are expected to continue climbing. But university officials suspect that state schools in particular could see a spike in interest as some cash-strapped families look for tuition breaks. Even if students get into a desired school, they might not get into the programs they want.

“What this means to students is that it’s going to be more competitive to get into a state college than before,” said Kristen Campbell, director for college preparation programs for Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions in New York City.

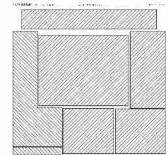
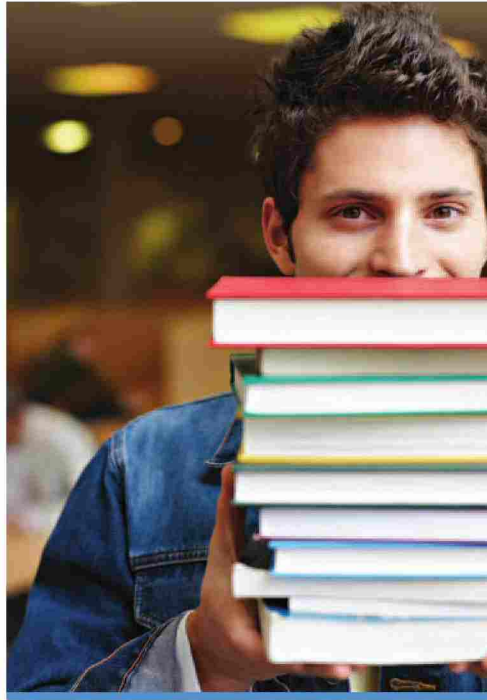
The application process, which begins in the fall with early admissions, peaks in January as essays, letters of recommendation, standardized test scores and synopses of extracurricular activities are compiled and sent.

“It was really hard,” said Sandra Alvarez, a senior at Fort Worth’s South Hills High School who applied to several schools. “You have so many things to do, you don’t know where to start.”

Taylor Breen, also at South Hills, recalls getting a call during physics class from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology asking for her father’s income records.

“You have to turn it in tomorrow, so figure it out,” Breen said, quoting the admissions officer. She plans to attend Columbia University in New York City.

College admission officials say there’s no surefire way to get into a first-choice school, though they agree that good grades, high standardized test scores and athletic or other talents help an



applicant rise above the competition.

“At the end of the day, colleges want students who are passionate,” Mike Moyer, author of “How to Make Colleges Want You,” writes. Students who don’t excel on the playing field or who have average grades might consider making a movie, writing for a local newspaper or running a political campaign, he said.

“They want students who have real interests and go out of their way to pursue their interests. ... If you are engaged in an activity in which teenagers don’t typically engage, you are someone who will bring a new point of view to a college classroom and a person who will inspire others to follow their dreams and interests. Colleges love this more than anything!”

Here’s what students can expect at a range of schools throughout Texas:

Top public universities

Texas has three: the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University in College Station and Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

With a desire to grow to 40,000 students and an enrollment that averages around 28,000, Texas Tech has room for qualified applicants. The competition is a bit fiercer at UT-Austin and A&M.

About 71 percent of those who applied for UT-Austin’s fall freshman class in 1998 were admitted. For the 2007 freshman class, 51 percent were admitted. Figures for A&M follow a similar trend.

Texans who rank in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating class automatically get accepted into a state college or university, including UT-Austin and Texas A&M. But they may not get into the program they want.

At UT-Austin, the competition for spots in the university’s business, communications and nursing schools is fierce, said Augustine Garza, UT-Austin deputy director of admissions. For the most competitive programs, 75 percent of the slots are reserved for top-10 percent applicants. But of those students, often only the ones in the top 1, 2 or 3 percent get in; the rest must compete in the general applicant pool for the remaining slots, Garza said.

Students who don’t get into a desired program are considered for their second choice. If that falls through, they become liberal arts majors but can reapply later to their first

choice, Garza said.

At UT-Austin, students who did not graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class are evaluated based on academic and personal characteristics, Garza said. "We look at everything," he said. Some have started businesses as high school sophomores and now make five-figure salaries or have worked with college professors on research programs, he said.

At A&M, students in the top 25 percent of their high school class are admitted if they have a combined SAT math and critical reading score of at least 1,300, with a score of at least 600 in each section. Those taking the ACT need a composite score of at least 30, with a score of at least 27 in math and English. Students must also take the writing portion of each test to be considered.

Tech admits students in the top 25 percent of their high school class if they also have a composite score of 25 on the ACT or a combined score of 1,140 on the critical reading and math sections of the SAT. Those ranking at least in the top 50 percent can get in with an ACT score of 28 or an SAT score of 1,230.

Top private schools

Competition is also tough for some private schools, but officials warn against inflating résumés with extracurricular or volunteer activities. Instead, they say they are looking for applications with focus on and passion for an area.

And you might think twice before have a consultant or parent write essays or handle the application. Both should be authentic, officials said.

"Elaborate on those things that you care most deeply about, so we're not distracted about something that you tried one year and didn't return to," said Julie Browning, dean for undergraduate enrollment at Rice University in Houston. "We're imagining how you're going to use your free time at Rice."

Rice, which ranks among the country's most selective institutions, accepts about 22 percent of applications, said Chris Munoz, vice president for enrollment. Rice typically looks for students in the top 5 percent of their graduating class and with a combined SAT score of 1,450 on math and critical reading.

After that, the university looks at a student's characteristics. "Are they involved?" Munoz said. "Are they active? And do they demonstrate leadership qualities?"

Closer to home

State schools such as the University of North Texas and the University of Texas at Arlington typically have more flexible admission standards than some private schools and Texas' flagship

universities.

UNT accepts students who ranked in the top 25 percent of their graduating class and had a combined SAT score of 950 on the critical reading and math sections or a composite score of 20 on the ACT.

UT-Arlington has no test-score requirements for students in the top quarter of their class.

At UNT, students who rank in the top 50 percent of their high school class can get automatic admission if they have a combined SAT score of 1,050 or a 23 on the ACT. Admission officials review applications from those who don't score that high.

UT-Arlington Provost Don Bobbitt said 75 to 79 percent of applicants are accepted. The 25,000-student school still has room to grow to 28,000 to 30,000 students.

Texas Christian University in Fort Worth worked to limit last year's freshman enrollment to about 1,600 students after receiving a record 12,200 applications. About half of those applicants were accepted, but typically some students choose other schools, said Ray Brown, dean of admissions.

A typical TCU student is in the top 20 percent of his high school graduating class and has a combined SAT score of 1,781 (writing, critical reading and math) or an ACT composite score of 26.8. The university also looks for musicians, actors, athletes and others to help create an interesting campus environment.

Tarrant County College, which has 40,000 students and is the region's fastest-growing institution, accepts local residents as long as

they're not on suspension from another university, said Cathie Jackson, associate vice chancellor for student development services. A high school diploma or a GED isn't necessary, she said. But students may have to take remedial classes to meet standards.

"We're here for those who need to proceed with their education, no matter where they stopped along the way," Jackson said.

Sometimes, simple perseverance pays off in the college admissions game.

Conrad Holub, 22, of Burseson said he neither was in the top 10 percent of his class at Burseson High School nor took any Advanced Placement classes. He said that he got accepted to other schools but that his goal was to attend the University of Texas at Austin. So he attended Austin Community College for a year, where he achieved a perfect 4.0 grade point average. He then transferred to UT-Austin but was not accepted into the business school. So he was a government major for two years, earning a 3.56 average. And that got him into the business school.

Holub will have to spend five years at UT-Austin, but to him it's all been worth it. "I had a goal set, and I did what I needed to do to achieve it," he said.

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Admission officials typically say they look at students holistically – grades, test scores, extracurricular activities and community involvement. To increase the chances of getting an acceptance letter, here's what admission officials and experts recommend:

High school courses

Four years of English, with courses that demand extensive writing.

Four years of math, typically including two years of algebra, a year of geometry and a year of pre-calculus.

Four years of science, typically biology, physics, chemistry and an advanced course in any of those.

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Three years of social studies, including world and American history.

Three to four years of one foreign language.

Whenever possible, take the most difficult level. In many regions, that usually means Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses.

Standardized tests

Most college and university admission departments require students to take the SAT or ACT. An increasing number of institutions

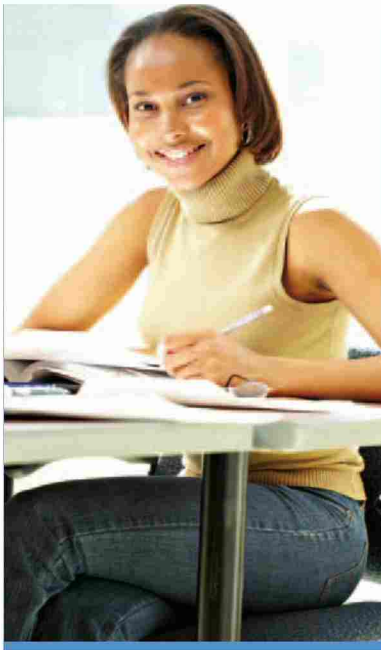
have dropped the standardized test requirement, including Bowdoin, Smith and Wake Forest. In Texas, students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their class automatically get into a state institution regardless of their scores.

Extracurricular activities

Students who excel in music, theater and, especially, sports have a leg up on the competition. But Mike Moyer, author of "How to Make Colleges Want You," suggests trying activities that most students don't do, such as starting a business. Students should also show initiative by, for example, starting a club at school, said Kristen Campbell of Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions. "It's really about thinking what you're passionate about and if you've stepped up and taken a leadership role," she said.

Other

Colleges look for diversity. From Texas? Consider a college in the Northeast or Northwest. An ethnic minority? Make sure the college knows that. Grew up in an unusual place? Don't be shy about discussing your childhood in an essay or at an interview.



Types of applications

The Common Application is used by 346 of the country's most selective institutions. Many institutions have their own applications available on their Web sites or through the mail.

Types of admissions

Admission policies vary from college to college, but the procedure at Trinity University in San Antonio is representative. A private, selective university, Trinity offers early decision for students who commit to enroll if admitted. The application deadline for early decision is Nov. 1. Then there is early action for students who want to know early whether they've been admitted

but don't want to commit to enrolling at Trinity. The deadline is Dec. 1. Finally, there is regular admission, the deadline for which is Feb. 1. To apply, students must submit the Common Application, an official high school transcript of grades, SAT or ACT results, a teacher evaluation, a recommendation from a high school counselor, a senior-year course list, an essay and a list of extracurricular

activities.

Number of schools to apply to

Robert Bardwell of the American School Counselor Association recommends that students seeking admission to highly selective colleges apply to five to eight institutions, including a “safety school,” where they're likely to be admitted. One school may be enough if students meet the criteria for automatic admission. But more than one is needed if they want to compare financial aid packages.

