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Guidance Office: Answers From Harvard's Dean

By William R. Fitzsimmons

Guidance Office



William R. Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard College for more than two decades, answers reader questions.

Over the last two days, The Choice has fielded nearly 900 questions for William R. Fitzsimmons, the longtime dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard College. Some of you submitted personal pleas for admission — whether on your own behalf, or, somewhat alarmingly, on behalf of children barely out of diapers. Others sent along queries about affirmative action, legacy admissions, the escalating costs of an elite college education and just how Harvard decides whom to let in, and whom to turn away.

Q.

Let me assume that 80 to 90 percent of the students who apply to Harvard are qualified and could reasonably be expected to do well there. They have good GPA scores and SATs. How does Harvard decide whom to admit? Are there objective criteria? If so can you describe them? Do you have requirements internally about the number of students you admit who want to major in a given subject area?

As the parent of three children my observation is that the process, as viewed by a student, is more a crapshoot than a rational, predictable process.

—Norman Gelfand

A.

Our goal in admissions is to attract the best students to the college. Many people believe “best” ought to be defined by standardized tests, grades, and class rank, and it is easy to understand why. Such a system, another Harvard dean of admissions, Bill Bender, wrote in 1960, “has great appeal because it has the merits of apparent simplicity, objectivity,

relative administrative cheapness in time and money and worry, a clear logical basis and therefore easy applicability and defensibility.”

While we value objective criteria, we apply a more expansive view of excellence. Test scores and grades offer some indication of students’ academic promise and achievement. But we also scrutinize applications for extracurricular distinction and personal qualities.

Students’ intellectual imagination, strength of character, and their ability to exercise good judgment — these are critical factors in the admissions process, and they are revealed not by test scores but by students’ activities outside the classroom, the testimony of teachers and guidance counselors, and by alumni/ae and staff interview reports.

With these aspects — academic excellence, extracurricular distinction, and personal qualities — in mind, we read with care all the components of each application.

Efforts to define and identify precise elements of character, and to determine how much weight they should be given in the admissions process, require discretion and judiciousness. But the committee believes that the “best” freshman class is more likely to result if we bring evaluation of character and personality into decisions than if we do not.

We believe that a diversity of backgrounds, academic interests, extracurricular talents, and career goals among students who live and learn together affects the quality of education in the same manner as a great faculty or material resources.

These considerations are guidelines that are neither comprehensive nor absolute.

We proceed with care, discretion, and humility because we know we are working with imperfect information and that no one can predict with certainty what an individual will accomplish during college or beyond. While we are heartened by the fact that Harvard’s graduation rate of 96 to 98 percent is always at or near the top of America’s colleges, it is clear that making admissions decisions is more of an art than science.

Harvard admissions officers, who serve as area representatives, read every application from their assigned areas. They record all data, contact the applicant and school for missing materials, and comment on the application’s strengths and weaknesses. Some applications receive as many as four readings and each reader checks factual data recorded and, more importantly, offers additional interpretations of the folder.

The standing committee on admissions and financial aid of the faculty, which includes about 30 members of the faculty of arts and sciences, formulates and implements policies on admissions and financial aid. Members of the standing committee also review applications that are representative of the entire pool — and those which present unusually strong scholarly credentials, demonstrate exceptional creativity in the arts, or raise questions of admissions policy.

Working under the guidelines established by the standing committee, the admissions committee makes decisions on individual applicants. The admission committee is comprised of the standing committee of the faculty augmented by about 35 staff members from the office of admissions and financial aid.

The admissions committee is divided into 20 subcommittees grouped by geographic region and representing approximately an equal number of applications. Each subcommittee normally includes four to five members, a senior admissions officer, and faculty readers.

Once all applications have been read and the subcommittee process begins, the area representative acts as an advocate, and summarizes to the subcommittee the strengths of each candidate. Subcommittee members discuss the application, and then vote to recommend an action to the full Committee. Majorities rule, but the degree of support expressed for applicants is always noted to allow for comparisons with other subcommittees.

Subcommittees then present and defend their recommendations to the full committee. While reading or hearing the summary of any case, any committee member may raise questions about the proposed decision and request a full review of the case.

Many candidates are re-presented in full committee. Discussions in subcommittee or in full committee on a single applicant can last up to an hour. The full Committee compares all candidates across all subcommittees, and therefore across geographic lines.

This rigorous comparative process strives to be deliberate, meticulous, and fair. It is labor intensive, but it permits extraordinary flexibility and the possibility of changing decisions virtually until the day the admissions committee mails them.

Personal qualities and character provide the foundation upon which each admission rests. Harvard alumni/ae often report that the education they received from fellow classmates was a critically important component of their college experience. The education that takes place between roommates, in dining halls, classrooms, research groups, extracurricular activities, and in Harvard's residential houses depends on selecting students who will reach out to others.

The admissions committee, therefore, takes great care to attempt to identify students who will be outstanding "educators," students who will inspire fellow classmates and professors.

While there are students at Harvard who might present unusual excellence in a single academic or extracurricular area, most admitted students are unusually strong across the board and are by any definition well-rounded. The energy, commitment, and dedication it takes to achieve various kinds and degrees of excellence serve students well during their college years and throughout their lives.

Q.

It has been my daughter's goal to go to an Ivy League school about as long as she knew she would be going to college. She is a Merit Scholar, school president — I could go on and on. But we are middle class in California. We do not qualify for any financial aid, yet we cannot afford to spend over \$50,000 per year to send her to a private college. Have administrators noticed that the middle class are the ones who are being squeezed out higher education?

—*Vicky*

A.

Promising students should never allow a lack of financial resources to stand in the way of reaching for their first choice college. Harvard has made sweeping changes in financial aid in recent years to make a Harvard education accessible and affordable for families across the economic spectrum. This year the undergraduate financial aid program is the most generous in our history with a budget of \$145 million, nearly a 7 percent increase from last year and a 167 percent increase over the past decade.

For those aspiring to a Harvard education in these difficult economic times, our renewed program arrived at a crucial time. The unwavering commitment of Drew Faust, President of Harvard University; Michael Smith, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences; and Evelyn Hammonds, Dean of Harvard College to keep Harvard open to talented students from all economic backgrounds sends a clear and compelling message to students and families everywhere.

Applying for financial aid in no way affects an applicant's chances for admission. All our financial aid is need-based; 60 percent of students receive grant assistance and about 70 percent receive some form of financial aid.

The new policy has three major components:

The "Zero to 10% Standard": Harvard's new financial aid policy dramatically reduces the amount families with incomes below \$180,000 will be expected to pay. Families with incomes above \$120,000 and below \$180,000 and with assets typical for these income levels are asked to pay 10 percent of their incomes. For those with incomes below \$120,000 the family contribution percentage declines steadily from 10 percent, reaching zero for those with incomes at \$60,000 and below. For example, a typical family making \$150,000 is asked to pay approximately \$15,000 for a child to attend Harvard College. Even families with incomes greater than \$180,000 are eligible for grants if they face unusual financial challenges.

No Loans: In calculating the financial aid packages offered to undergraduates, Harvard does not expect students to take out loans. Loans have been replaced by increased grants from the University, but remain available for students and families upon request.

Eliminate Home Equity from Consideration: Harvard no longer considers home equity in determining a family's ability to pay for college. This change has reduced the price by an average of \$4,000 per year for affected families as compared with previous practice.

Many other colleges, public and private, have also made significant changes to their financial aid programs. Students and families can explore colleges' websites to learn about the new financial aid opportunities that have emerged in the past few years.