

Getting in

In November of 2002, Anita Aboagye-Agyeman faced a wrenching decision. She had just received the kind of offer most of her 900 fellow seniors at Francis Lewis High School in Queens, New York, could only dream of: a full-tuition college scholarship. Through a program for multicultural teens from urban high schools, Aboagye-Agyeman would be attending DePauw University in Indiana.

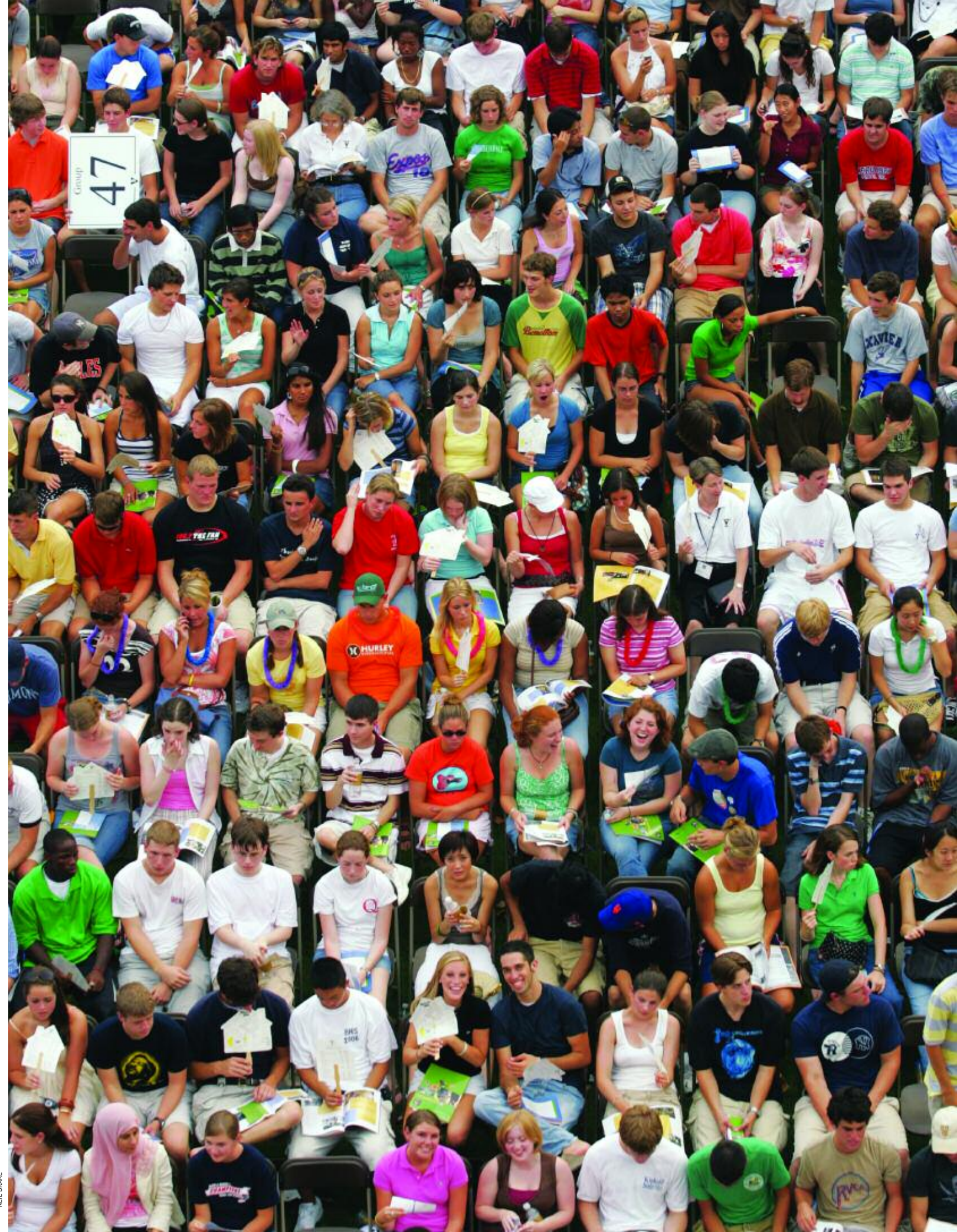
Aboagye-Agyeman had never been to Nashville, never seen the Vanderbilt campus, nor met anyone who'd gone there. She had been raised by her grandmother in Ghana, Africa, and then joined her parents in New York when she was 15.

But she had thoroughly researched Vanderbilt, fallen in love with it online, and harbored a gut instinct that it was the right school for her. Did she dare turn down a sure thing?

With her parents' permission, and with fingers crossed, she turned down the scholarship to DePauw, applied to Vanderbilt, and waited.

Building each new class of Vanderbilt undergraduate students takes innovation and a large dose of humanity.

Incoming undergraduate students at Founder's Walk festivities last August



NEIL BRANKE

Four long months later Aboagye-Agyeman stood in her family home holding her breath as she opened a thick envelope and read the cover letter. It began: “We are pleased to offer you admission to Vanderbilt University . . .” Aboagye-Agyeman screamed so loudly that her mother rushed into the room to see what was wrong. “I got into Vanderbilt! I got into Vanderbilt!” her daughter shouted. Vanderbilt was also offering her a generous financial aid package. Her huge gamble had paid off.

In May, Aboagye-Agyeman graduated with a major in political science and has begun work for a Manhattan public relations firm. She has no doubt she made the right decision four years ago by risking everything to get into Vanderbilt.

Each year millions of American high school students take part in a high-stress rite of passage — applying to college. And their questions are legion: Should I apply to a dozen schools or focus on my dream school? Should I go the early admission route or hedge my bets? How does a lower-cost public university compare in real dollars with a private school that offers more financial aid? Will I be happy attending a

university halfway across the continent where no one else from my high school has ever been accepted? What if I have no idea what I want to do to support myself for the rest of my life?

Were she to apply to Vanderbilt now, Aboagye-Agyeman would be taking an even greater chance. As the university has risen in prestige and prominence, it has become tougher for students to get in. Slightly more than 30 percent of students who apply to Vanderbilt receive offers of admission, and if trends continue, the percentage will drop even further.

Newsweek last year named Vanderbilt one of its 25 “Hot Schools,” identifying the university as one of the “new Ivies,” schools that provide great academics and first-rate faculties. In the World University Rankings by *The Times* of London, the most respected worldwide rankings of universities, Vanderbilt jumped from No. 114 in 2005 to No. 53 in 2006. And for the fourth year in a row, Vanderbilt is ranked among the top 20 national universities in the influential *U.S. News & World Report* annual “Best Colleges” rankings — 18th among 4,200 undergraduate institutions in the country. (It is the 19th consecutive year Vanderbilt has been chosen by the magazine as one of the top 25 national universities.)

And in another crucial way, Vanderbilt is in rarified company with a small group of select institutions that include MIT, Yale and Harvard: Once a student is accepted, Vanderbilt will

meet that individual’s entire calculated need by offering a financial aid package that might include a combination of grants and scholarships, loans, and work-study programs. Vanderbilt treats every application as need-blind, meaning students’ level of financial need does not impact whether or not they are admitted. More than 60 percent of the student body receives some form of financial aid, belying Vanderbilt’s past reputation as a school that caters primarily to privileged kids. This commitment to need-blind admissions and meeting demonstrated need, along with a growing number of applicants from all economic backgrounds, means that Vanderbilt now budgets

more than \$120 million a year for financial aid.

In step with Vanderbilt’s rise in prominence, however, comes a parallel rise in confusion among parents and children: Which students will be accepted, and how are those decisions made? With increasing numbers of high schoolers aiming to get into the most competitive institutions and with nearly every university doggedly seeking the nation’s top students, the college admissions process has become more mysterious to the general public, says Douglas Christiansen, Vanderbilt’s associate provost for enrollment and dean of admissions.

“I have seen the stress high schoolers take upon themselves in trying to be in dozens of clubs and activities,” says Christiansen, “when what we’re looking for is students who have had meaningful experiences that will translate to a positive impact on the campus culture. We’re building a class, a set of learners, an environment.”

“Vanderbilt admissions officers have two primary questions in mind when reviewing an applicant,” says John Gaines, director of undergraduate admissions. “Will he or she enrich the Vanderbilt community? And is Vanderbilt the best university to stimulate the intellectual, social and emotional growth of this person?”

Admissions officers set about to make those determinations in as fair, ethical and respectful a manner as possible, given that they must select a class of 1,550 freshmen out of about 12,800 candidates. Reviewers must essentially mastermind an “ideal” freshman class from thousands of outstanding high school seniors. This can make for an intense process. Every single application will be reviewed at least twice — sometimes as many as five or six times — before an admission decision is made.

Explains Chancellor Gordon Gee, “Vanderbilt’s goal is to provide the best undergraduate experience in the country. And we are getting there; we might even already *be* there. But



For students like Anita Aboagye-Agyeman, deciding whether to accept a full scholarship to another school or hold out for your top choice can be agonizing. In her case, it paid off.

DANIEL DUBOIS

Reaching Students When It Counts

Talk about hitting the ground running. When Douglas Christiansen arrived at Vanderbilt last August as the university’s new associate provost for enrollment and dean of admissions, the latest crop of freshmen were just filing in, learning their way around campus, and figuring out the intricacies of drop-add. Christiansen, who’d spent the previous 11 years at Purdue University, hardly had time to give these newcomers a passing nod before launching headfirst into admissions decisions for high school students clamoring to get into Vanderbilt for fall 2007.

Christiansen brings a compelling philosophy to the Vanderbilt admissions process: a firm belief that universities have a social responsibility to improve the nation’s K–12 educational system by helping prepare bright students for life beyond high school and by boosting their access to the opportunities a college education provides.

“We want to help change lives, and education is a major factor in that,” Christiansen says. “So we need to be connecting with individuals at earlier ages to make them understand that they have as much right as anyone to attend a highly selective institution—but they have to be prepared academically. That means we must expand our pipelines to reach these students.”

Christiansen has a Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and more than 20 years’ experience working in university admissions and higher education. Under his leadership as assistant vice president for enrollment management and dean of admissions at Purdue, the number of undergraduate applications submitted to the West Lafayette campus increased by 48 percent. He has served as an enrollment management consultant to colleges across the United States.

“When I made the decision to leave Purdue a year ago,” he says, “one reason was the selection process here at Vanderbilt—one of the top 10 in the United States in terms of fairness, looking at the depth and breadth of individual students on their own merits. Can we continue to get better? Of course. But do we have a fair and equitable system that looks at each applicant individually in terms of who they are and what they can bring? Yes, 100 percent.”

When former admissions dean William Shain moved to Bowdoin College last year, the Vanderbilt administration began reexamining the structure of the admissions and enrollment offices. Those offices have now been realigned to enhance student learning, increase student satisfaction, and boost student retention and graduation rates. In fact, admissions is now only one-eighth of the dean’s responsibilities. Today all offices concerned with undergraduate student enrollment are coordinated under one umbrella to serve the needs of prospective, incoming and continuing students.

On the side that deals with recruitment and marketing, Christiansen is revamping the system by streamlining recruitment efforts and marketing to a younger population of future undergraduates. The goal is to identify middle and high school students from across the country who have the brains and the chutzpah to excel in a rigorous university environment, even if they come from a low socioeconomic background or attend schools that normally don’t graduate high numbers of college-ready students.

Vanderbilt already has initiated several programs to catch prospective students earlier in their educational lives and help them embark on the right academic track. In this outreach effort



Christiansen

DANIEL DUBOIS

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many new programs are being developed such as Black and Gold Days, which are half-day programs designed to introduce high school juniors, sophomores, freshmen and even eighth-graders to Vanderbilt and to the college-search process. Vanderbilt also offers opportunities throughout the university such as a summer program for academically gifted students in grades eight through 12 known as the Program for Talented Youth.

“If all the highly selective universities are just marketing to the same pool and competing for the same top students without expanding the number of students in that pool, then we’re not doing anybody any good,” says Christiansen. “But

if we start looking at access, affordability, and preparedness of students for college, we can start to expand that pipeline. At the end of the day, these kids may not choose to go to Vanderbilt, but we’ll still have more highly qualified individuals going to college and growing up as great citizens of their community.”

Vanderbilt’s Office of Enrollment Management comprises:

- Office of Undergraduate Admissions
- Office of Student Financial Aid
- Office of Honors Scholarships, ENGAGE (Early Notification of Guaranteed Admission for Graduate Education), and Chancellor’s Scholarship Programs
- Ingram Scholarship Program
- Office of Undergraduate Honor Scholarships
- Office of the University Registrar
- Vanderbilt Institutional Research Group (VIRG)

to do so we need to attract the most talented student body in the country—not by the numbers, not by SAT scores or GPAs, but by building our class one person at a time.”

The wheels that lead to Vanderbilt are set in motion when an application hits the desk of an admissions officer, who pores through thousands of forms and letters from prospective freshmen each year. For months on end, admissions officers gather to review applications and advocate for students, trying to construct the best possible class. They search not just for the obvious superstars, but also for people who will blossom within Vanderbilt’s environment. They sift through students with a variety of interests—philosophers who are also interested in medicine, aspiring engineers who also play the cello, debating whizzes who are also athletically gifted—students who share a common desire to learn across academic boundaries and to take advantage of the intellectual resources of a university like Vanderbilt. They look for students who will add to the cultural life, who will bring divergent social and political views and pursuits to campus, and who will relish and thrive in the kind of environment Vanderbilt offers. They look for students who will add to the cultural life at Vanderbilt, who will bring divergent social and political views and pursuits to campus, and who will relish and thrive in the kind of environment Vanderbilt offers.

The qualities that successful applicants have in common, says Nicholas Zeppos, provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs, are that they “are curious intellectually, curious about meeting people from different backgrounds, curious about pushing the boundaries of what they know, and curious in ways that connect across disciplines.”

Students are not ranked against each other. Each candidate is viewed as a whole, based on academic performance in high school, test scores, extracurricular activities and letters of recommendation, essays and personal statements. Viewing all these factors together, the committee tries to piece together a comprehensive profile of the applicant. Some students are then admitted. Others are denied, deferred or wait-listed.

One factor *not* considered during the admissions process is financial need. Students whose parents can afford to pay full tuition have no leg up on those from less wealthy families. Nor do children of celebrities and politicians or even of alumni. Legacy applicants—those whose parents or grandparents are Vanderbilt alumni—are considered in the same pool as others who hope to attend. A greater percentage of legacy applicants receives offers of admission because as a group they are generally well prepared and competitive. Being a legacy does not guarantee admission, however—for one thing, it would be impossible to admit them all. Of total applicants to the freshman class entering in 2007, 1,700 students, or 13 percent, were legacies. Because the entire class is only 1,550 students, it’s easy to see the problem.

Casting a Wide Net

Every high school in America has its own personality, its unique klatch of young men and women ready to embark on further academic adventures. To tap this talent pool, Vanderbilt admissions officers hit the road from September through December and again in the spring. Their mission: to tell the Vanderbilt story and to find students who’d like to become a part of that story. Because there are enormous differences in the quality of education among post-secondary schools, the admissions staff casts a very wide net.

Vanderbilt is among the three dozen or so top universities that can draw the sharpest students from the most highly regarded high schools in the country—schools like New Trier Township High School, a large public high school in a Chicago suburb.

New Trier is acclaimed for its academically rigorous curriculum and consistently ranks as one of the top public high schools in America. Every fall Joel Hart, Vanderbilt assistant admissions director, makes a visit there. It is one of Vanderbilt’s biggest “feeder” schools.

Nearly 99 percent of New Trier students matriculate to four-year colleges, many to highly selective universities. Out of a senior class of more than 1,000, each year Vanderbilt receives upwards of 50 applications. After review the university sends out about 17 offers of admission, and between 10 and 12 New Trier students accept.

Typically, only 10 to 12 students sit in on Hart’s recruitment session, but, he says, “Once classes get out, 25 more kids will run by briefly to say, ‘Sorry I couldn’t come to your talk, but I didn’t want to miss my AP biology class, and I’ve got to hurry to AP physics.’ They’ll ask a quick question or tell me they’re applying to Vanderbilt and dart off.”

This fall Hart was sifting through the stack of early decision applications and saw that one of them was from the senior class president at New Trier. “I was ecstatic,” Hart admits. “He’s not just a great student, but a great person. We were excited that he wanted to come to Vanderbilt badly enough to apply early decision. We admitted him, and are sure he’ll be a visible member of our community.”

A few weeks later admissions officer Brad Weiner is on the road to speak at a panel discussion at a large public high school in Alabama. Located in a suburb 10 miles from Huntsville, the community is filled with engineers, rocket scientists and computer scientists associated with the NASA Space Center and nearby high-tech industries. In a class of more than 600 seniors, 98 percent of the students are college bound—75 percent heading to four-year schools and 23 percent to two-year programs. The top 10 percent of these seniors are vying to get into the nation’s most competitive universities.

Hundreds of students and parents have gathered in the school cafeteria. Weiner gives a two-minute talk on the topic



Admissions officer Brad Weiner hits the road to spread the word about Vanderbilt. Here he visits a large high school near Huntsville, Ala., where, in a community filled with NASA engineers and scientists, 98 percent of the student body is college bound.

“Admission to Highly Selective Universities,” touting Vanderbilt’s holistic review process and need-blind admissions policy.

After a panel discussion attendees disperse to speak to various representatives. A long line forms in front of the Vanderbilt table, with students and parents waiting patiently to ask Weiner questions.

As he is packing up to drive back to Nashville that night, Weiner comments, “These students are terrific. Having access to NASA makes a huge difference. I get the same kinds of students from Seattle, whose parents work in the aerospace and computer technology industry. Those Microsoft students are amazing, too.”

Not every school can offer students access to a wealth of college-prep and advanced-placement courses. Yet, Vanderbilt admissions personnel are determined to reach the best and the brightest from lesser-known schools as well. Vanderbilt needs students from households unfamiliar with the admissions maze as much as it needs kids from elite schools who began preparing for college in kindergarten.

On a stormy day in late fall 2006, Heather Shows, director of scholarships, drives to a high school in rural northern Georgia for a college fair. The gym has been entirely devoted to College Fair Day, and all students from grades nine through 12 will eventually wander through. Most of the recruiters are from small local and regional colleges, junior colleges, technical and vocational schools, a few large state public schools, and all branches of the military.

At this school 60 percent of the senior class will go on to two- or four-year colleges, vocational-technical schools or the military. For the rest, formal education will end with high school. In a school of 1,600 students and 350 seniors, the senior class college counselor has her work cut out for her. Many of the students are on the free and reduced-price lunch program, which qualifies them for fee waivers for the SAT and ACT college admissions tests—if they meet the application deadlines. “Pushing these students to understand deadlines is the hardest part of my job,” she says. “They have to learn to stay on top of scholarships and to match up with schools that can offer financial aid.”

During the course of the morning, several seniors venture over to the

Vanderbilt table and mention that they haven’t yet taken the SAT or ACT. It’s mid-November. Most regular-decision applications are due in a month and a half.

In contrast to generations past, 58 percent of today’s college students are women. This college fair illustrates one reason for this phenomenon. These types of events held in schools where the majority of students come from working-class backgrounds play to the strengths of young females. Bands of four or five girls stop by the Vanderbilt table, asking questions: Do you have a nursing major? (The answer is yes, but it’s a graduate program only.) Does Vanderbilt have a women’s varsity volleyball team? (Not yet.) The girls talk about their chances, empowering each other, feeding off the group dynamic, handing each other pamphlets and contact forms.

Among the males the dynamic is less supportive. Groups of guys pass by the table several times, glancing over without stopping. Time and again, one boy peels off from his peers, comes over to the Vanderbilt table by himself, and fills out a contact form without saying a word. He drifts back over to the group, leaving the brochures on the table.

The boys who do stop by in groups tend to make fun of each other. “You can’t apply to Vanderbilt. That’s a school for doctors,” one teases another. Another young man comes by the table. “I’m not smart enough to get into Vanderbilt,” he informs Shows.

“You shouldn’t sell yourself short,” she responds sincerely. She leaves the fair later

that morning with a 6-inch-high stack of contact information forms. Scores of high schoolers in Georgia have big dreams.

For Christina Webb, associate director of undergraduate admissions, meeting amazing kids from both public and private schools is her favorite part of the job. “I enjoy working with the students on all levels—whether it’s at an open house, at a citywide college fair, or in their high schools—and helping students who may not have even considered college navigate the search and enrollment process, even if they won’t be applying to Vanderbilt,” she says.

Speaking for the entire Vanderbilt admissions staff, Webb adds, “We’re not here for the riches. We’re here because we care about what we do, we believe in Vanderbilt, and we find this job fulfilling, important and worthwhile.”

Fifty-eight percent of today’s college students are women. College fairs illustrate one reason: Bands of four or five girls stop by the Vanderbilt table, empowering each other. The boys who stop by in groups tend to make fun of each other.

Says Christiansen, “We value that our alumni were here and that they want to carry on the Vanderbilt tradition with their children and grandchildren. We take that very seriously as a factor in our holistic review process. We are clearly becoming one of the most competitive higher-education institutions in the United States, and as the value of the Vanderbilt degree continues to grow exponentially, so does our pool of applicants from among the very best students around the world.”

Ultimately, there is no secret formula for getting into Vanderbilt. Strong high school performance, however, is critical. In the fall 2006 entering class, for example, the average student who matriculated at Vanderbilt ranked in the top 6.5 percent of his or her high school class. And 77 percent of last year’s entering class was in the top 10 percent of their high school class. The mid-range SAT scores of students enrolled in 2006 were between 1300 and 1470 (discounting the new writing portion of the test) and between 29 and 32 for the ACT. Students whose test scores and rank fall below that (and 25 percent of applicants’ do) are not automatically removed from consideration. Numbers matter, but they are only part of the equation. Admitted applicants tend to be those who have excelled academically and outside the classroom in high school, demonstrated leadership skills, and shown an interest in local and global issues.

Beyond that, admissions officers make note of students with interesting hobbies and talents; students from public and private high schools; applicants whose parents or grand-

parents attended Vanderbilt; home-schoolers; athletes who want to participate in varsity, club or intramural sports; ROTC candidates; students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups; kids from rich, poor or middle-class families and from rural, urban and suburban communities; techies, singers, dancers, artists, musicians and poets. Every attribute is fair game, and no single one trumps any other. All are factored into the review.

In many ways the Vanderbilt admissions office operates as a universe unto itself, and while admissions officers willingly take recommendations from alumni, donors, and mem-

bers of the administration and faculty, in the end it is their responsibility to craft a freshman class from thousands of high achievers. Like the university itself, the admissions officers—26 in all—comprise a mix of ages, races, ethnicities, religions, educational backgrounds and life experiences.

“I have worked in the higher-education admissions arena for more than 20 years, and I’ve never worked with a collection of individuals more committed to the outcome and benefit of the student,” says Christiansen, who came to Vanderbilt last year from

Purdue University. “Looking at both the tangible and intangible sides of the file, they are ready to present each student’s case in a way that will set that student apart. I am impressed by their ability to humanize the application beyond what’s on paper.”

This compassion and advocacy is at least partially due to the fact that the admissions officers have been out there in the trenches, spending weeks on the road during the summer and fall, fanning out across the country to nearly all 50 states and countries abroad, speaking to high schools, setting up tables at college fairs, meeting prospective applicants face to face, and talking up Vanderbilt as a great place to spend the next four years.

These extensive road trips, Dean Christiansen says, help establish relationships with underrepresented groups at Vanderbilt—students, for example, from tiny schools in the rural Midwest and huge urban schools in California. “We are trying to make sure everybody has the same information and the same ability to know what Vanderbilt can offer them—not just those with greater access. We want to even the playing field.”

At the same time, the admissions staff works to maintain connections with those select high schools, public and private, whose students regularly apply to the country’s top colleges.

Just because Vanderbilt reaches out to a student does not guarantee admission. Every applicant must go through the same

Once a student is accepted, Vanderbilt will meet that individual’s entire calculated need by offering a financial aid package that might include a combination of grants and scholarships, loans, and work-study programs. Students’ level of financial need does not impact whether or not they are admitted.

To Find Out More

“Our job is to help students understand the possibilities,” says Douglas Christiansen, dean of admissions. “Call. Come and visit. Let us be a part of your journey.”

- Call **615/322-2561**.
- Vanderbilt’s comprehensive—and newly revamped—admissions Web site (www.vanderbilt.edu/admissions) provides information about application deadlines, financial aid, visiting campus and much more. It offers sections for parents, alumni and guidance counselors as well as prospective and newly admitted students.
- To find out more about financial aid, go to www.vanderbilt.edu/admissions/financing.

3 Ways Alumni Can Get Involved

1 Alumni can help promote Vanderbilt by taking part in **college fairs** in their region of the country. Vanderbilt sends admissions officers to as many fairs as possible, but relies on alumni as well. Contact Angelo Lee in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at arc@vanderbilt.edu for details.

2 The **Alumni Interviewing Program (AIP)** allows students who have applied for admission to speak with a Vanderbilt alumnus. More than 1,600 Vanderbilt alumni in 22 countries have already registered to participate. Contact Tricia Blumenthal in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions for assistance at tricia.blumenthal@vanderbilt.edu.

3 Every April, **Vanderbilt hosts events** in cities around the country for students who have been admitted. Many are still making their final college decision, and others have already decided to attend Vanderbilt. Usually, events are held at a public venue. To become involved in a local “Vanderbilt & You” event for admitted students, contact the Office of Alumni Relations at alumni@vanderbilt.edu.

admissions process, which is another attempt by the university to be impartial. Applicants who are not known to Vanderbilt, perhaps because their high schools are unknown to admissions personnel, are given as fair a shake as anyone else.

Critics may argue that because the university is already turning away so many qualified applicants, it shouldn’t be expending so many resources on attracting more. The recruitment push, they claim, is a tactic for schools to bolster their acceptance rates so they look better in annual college rankings.

“We are not driven by that,” insists Gee. “If we were, our numbers, which are high, would be even higher.”

Ben Wildavsky, formerly editor of *U.S. News*’ “America’s Best Colleges” and now a senior fellow in policy and research at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, contends that rankings are simply a way to codify a pecking order that’s been out there a long time. For more than a century, the major Ivy League schools—Harvard, Princeton and Yale—have stood atop the heap in terms of perceived prestige. Yet, what that actually implies, he says, is that all the other 4,000-plus institutions have a fighting chance to be measured against each other.

“If you are an institution like Vanderbilt, and if you want to break into the national top tier, having an outside yardstick can be helpful. Rankings can be your friend,” Wildavsky says. “That doesn’t mean that rankings are perfect or that rankings can’t be improved or that rankings aren’t sometimes gamed. But if you’re a school that is trying to rise in the rankings, and in order to do that you start lowering your class size, improving your graduation rate, and increasing how much you spend on research, arguably, those are all good things that are good for the institution and good for the students.”

The next frontier in rankings, Wildavsky says, will be to develop valid measurements of how effective one’s college education turns out to be. “Not just who gets admitted and what do they learn, but do they learn what they need in order to be productive members of society?”

In any case, now that Vanderbilt is on the admissions bullet train, there’s no jumping off. The kind of top-notch students who list Vanderbilt among their college prospects are demanding an environment that values diversity, says Christiansen. They want to interact with people from various backgrounds and to gain exposure to original ideas and new visions.

Political science professor Bruce Oppenheimer, for one, has noticed a change in the campus zeitgeist in the last five years or so. “In the past, if I had a student in my class from Chicago, other than geographically he wasn’t much different from the students who came from the South or from Manhattan,” he says. “But now I’m noticing changes in my class in all measures of diversity. In the fall I taught a congressional elections seminar, and it was the best class I’ve had in my 35 years of teaching. These students were super. They came from all over the country—from cities, suburbs and rural areas. They were ethnically and politically diverse, and they were very engaged. Although they were good natured and tolerant of one another’s views, they didn’t hold back. And the papers they presented were of professional quality.”

Almost a third of the 2006–07 freshman class is made up of racial and ethnic minorities. For 2007–08, total applications are up by about 500—nearly 400 of which are from minority students. More than half are from regions of the country outside the South—from all 50 states and from more than 50 countries worldwide. Christiansen is making a concerted effort to increase the presence of highly qualified international students on campus, aiming for a goal of 8 percent of the freshman class.

“So many of our graduates are working all over the world that we need to expose them as undergraduates to international cultures, beliefs and businesses,” he says.

These very intentional changes will only enhance students’ lives in the long term. May graduate Anita Aboagye-Agyeman, for instance, not only is working for a PR firm; she is studying to take the LSAT exam. After attending law school she wants to enact policy changes to the educational systems in Ghana and in the U.S. The insights she gained at Vanderbilt have made her all the more determined to give back to both countries.

“I consider myself lucky that I’ve been able to experience the best of both worlds,” Aboagye-Agyeman says. “Vanderbilt has given me so much, and I’m very grateful for the amazing four years I had there. I hope that whatever I do, I become very successful financially so I can give a ton of money to the school.” She pauses and allows a grin. “Actually, I dream of Vanderbilt putting my name on a building, and I can sit there and watch as students come through and try to pronounce my name.” ▼



Contents Under Pressure

THE JOURNEY OF A COLLEGE APPLICATION

Between the months of October 2006 and January 2007, 12,850 high school students dropped packets in the mail, launching their college applications toward the netherworld of the admissions office at Vanderbilt University, entrusting their futures to a process over which they had little control. They knew only that for the next several months, they would be forced to sit back and wait for a decision.

Once it leaves the sender's hands, every undergraduate application embarks upon a journey of checks, balances, and a large dose of humanity, beginning the moment it arrives in the Vanderbilt admissions office.

Every year the admissions office receives around 1,300 early decision applications, and from this round admits about 550 students, or fewer than a third of the freshman class. The early decision agreement is contractually binding, and students who are admitted agree to attend Vanderbilt and withdraw applications to all other schools.

The vast majority apply through regular decision, giving them more time to choose among schools where they've been accepted and to compare financial aid packages. Most applications arrive at the office in disparate parts. One application might contain as many as 10 different pieces of mail—including part two of the Vanderbilt application, SAT and ACT scores, recommendation letters, academic records and transcripts, and financial aid request forms. From Dec. 26 through Jan. 5, the admissions office receives anywhere from 20 to 35 buckets of mail a day filled with assorted elements of undergraduate applications.

Students may also opt to submit the "common application" online. Accepted by more than 300 post-secondary schools, the common application has made it easier for students to apply to multiple universities.

After all pieces of the application are pulled together, they go into a folder tabbed for a particular Vanderbilt undergraduate school—the College of Arts and Science, Peabody College, Blair School of Music or

School of Engineering. At that point the file undergoes a process known as "blue sheeting." Blue-sheeters translate all the academic transcripts, including courses taken, grades received and class ranking, into a single standard. In this way the reviewer can get a quick assessment of a student's performance.

Standardizing the transcript has become crucial to the process. As more high schools across the country have incorporated honors, advanced placement (AP), post-AP, international baccalaureate and independent study classes into their curricula, the scale for judging performance in those classes has metamorphosed. A student from one school may have a 5.2 grade-point average, another a 12.3, and another a 4.0. The child with the 4.0 may actually be the strongest student.

"When people ask the average GPA of our incoming classes, I tell them I can't answer that question because it's not fair,"

says Christina Webb, associate director of admissions. "At some very academically rigorous schools, a 3.8 could be in the middle of the class. In some high schools a 3.9 could be awful."

Once the application is blue-sheeted and has all its necessary component parts, it is filed according to territory. The admissions officer who covers that geographical area or school type will read it first, followed by a second reader. From February through mid-March, reviewers spend nearly every waking hour buried in applications, tunneling through stacks of folders, reading essays and evaluating transcripts, many times agonizing over their decisions.

If both readers strongly believe a student should be admitted, the application is sent down one pathway. If they think he or she is so phenomenal as to be considered for a prestigious scholarship, the application follows a different track. Those who clearly are not going to be accepted travel a

separate route. The bulk of applications enter a pool for the "probables," meaning they will be put up for discussion by the admissions committee.

By late February the admissions committee cranks into high gear, meeting three times a day, five to seven days a week, for three full weeks. In committee, individual admissions officers campaign—even crusade—for certain students from their territories to be given the remaining coveted slots.

"The regular-decision committee meetings can be extremely brutal," says Webb.

"We're getting into rarified air at this point," admissions officer Heather Shows adds. "All these kids are fabulous."

For these students the quality of the application can make or break an acceptance decision. As Shari Sutton, assistant admissions director, explains to prospective students, "Our job is to be your advocate, but you need to give us the information to put up a good fight. When writing your long essay, your goal should be to make somebody feel like they know you when they've never even met you."

While a well-written, fascinating essay may not be enough to propel a student into consideration, it definitely helps committee members distinguish among impressive candidates.

When it comes to the weight and value placed on high school AP courses and extracurricular activities, Vanderbilt admissions staffers are less engaged by students who have taken a slew of AP courses and joined a gaggle of after-school clubs, if they appear to be padding their résumés. What counts is a genuine pursuit of interest and a willingness to tap into the most challenging courses offered by the applicant's high school.

Committee members look for upward trends in a student's grades. They are more likely to give a break to students whose GPAs were brought down by their ninth-grade report cards than those who did well at first but let their grades drop during their upper-class years, says Douglas Christiansen, dean of admissions.

After long and grueling deliberations, the university will send out about 4,000 admit packets, anticipating that 1,550 students will accept and enroll. About 8,000 applicants will receive the thin envelopes signaling that they will not be coming to Vanderbilt.

Once all decisions are made, Vanderbilt prints thousands of letters informing students whether or not they have been admitted—whereupon everyone in admissions switches gears and goes through a procedure of checking and double-checking to ensure that the right letter goes to the right person. Finally, they hold a "stripping party" to peel away the protective strips and seal the envelopes. On the Monday of notification, everybody forms a fire brigade, passing buckets of packets through the mailroom and out to a waiting mail truck. Once the truck is loaded, they join together for a celebration and go home early for the first time in months.

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April is the cruelest month for admissions officers. Parents begin calling, upset that their children did not get in. Admitted students, unaware

that admissions officers championed them in committee and went to battle on their behalf, might be angry they weren't given a selective scholarship. They have no way of knowing that in a pool of terrific applicants, they were not the stars they might be at their high schools. Others will phone

to thank the admissions officers for their efforts but say, "I'm going to Yale instead."

"That's like a stab in the heart," says Heather Shows. "I'm thinking, 'I fought so hard for you! You'd be perfect for Vanderbilt!'"

In the end the rewards for the admissions team are enjoyed each fall when a fresh crop of extraordinary freshmen arrives on campus. For the next several years, every time a student scores a game-winning goal, or has a provocative article published in *The Hustler*, or participates in groundbreaking research, somebody in the admissions office takes a victory lap.

"Hey, look!" one admissions officer will say to another. "That's my kid!"

From left: Reading applications; a "stripping party" calls for all hands on deck as admission packets leave Vanderbilt and go into a waiting mail truck.



PHOTOS BY DANIEL DUBOIS

