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COLLEGIATE CHOICES

There's still hope for late applicants

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High school seniors just applying to colleges are facing a hard lesson: a high percentage of students want a higher education.

And now more than ever, a higher percentage of those students are applying to more colleges than ever -- giving them a smaller chance of getting in to their college of choice.

Students today are applying to eight or nine colleges, compared with about five just 20 years ago, said Meredith Eastman, associated director and counselor with Campus Bound, a national organization that specializes in the college application process.

She attributes this increase to societal and technological advances.

"As our society has advanced, there aren't limitations to travel," Eastman said. "The additional technology allowing people to apply online has made it easier -- it doesn't feel as much of a hassle."

The hassle could begin now, with Feb. 1 priority deadlines at both the University of Alabama and Auburn University.

Students who miss that deadline might have to find alternative ways of getting in -- through junior colleges or through conditional entrances, where they would be required to maintain a certain grade point average.

Depending on how the freshman class is filling up at Auburn, it might be a little tighter "as far as the ability to get in," said Cindy Singley, the school's director of university recruitment.

"We will accept applications probably through May," she said. "Certainly, if we receive it before Feb. 1, it gives them a better chance of getting in."

As college admissions become more competitive -- and people are becoming less certain of their acceptance -- students are broadening their search in order to widen their safety net, "and to make sure they are going to have some options."

Where colleges used to receive about 4,000 applications for the freshman class, they now are receiving 6,000 for the same number of openings.

"It definitely is harder now," Eastman said. "Partly because there are more teenagers in this age bracket.

"We do a lot of work on focusing on not what options they missed, but what is still available to them. If college 'x' deadline is already passed, we look at what they can do to eventually get there -- maybe go to a local college and apply (later) as a transfer student."

Amanda Flemming, a 17-year-old senior at Prattville Christian Academy, wants to attend Alabama but needs to bring up her current ACT score of 19 -- Alabama requires a 21.

Flemming, who will retake her test in February, has studied with her father every night for weeks.

"It makes a difference," she said of the extra study time. "It's stressful ... but I have no fears. I am ready for college."

Flemming started looking at colleges this past summer. She wants to attend Alabama because she feels it has the best criminal justice program.

There is a lot of pressure students feel that is unnecessary, said Rachael Heartsill, PCA secondary counselor.

"There is a college for all of them. Maybe if their GPA is lower, there is a smaller school available for them.

"There are alternate routes into the major universities. The reality of it is, many colleges have conditional entrances. If the ACT is low, and the grades are high, there are conditions such as they can stay if a certain GPA is maintained at college."

Some students waited to apply to colleges because they didn't make the decision until now to even attend college. And some might have been overwhelmed with other parts of life.

"College is easy to push off when you have English due on Tuesday and math on Wednesday," Campus Bound's Eastman said. "Some may unintentionally postpone because they are nervous about the outcome.

"They are nervous about the application process and waiting for whether they are accepted. It's hard to be judged based on your grades and SAT and ACT scores, college essays and recommendations."

Marlaysia Pugh applied to Troy University as soon as she received her ACT scores. She did not want to wait any longer than necessary.

The 17-year-old senior at Jefferson Davis High School found out before Christmas that she was accepted to Troy University. She chose the school for its nursing program -- she wants to be a pediatric nurse -- and the only deadline she faces now is for housing on campus.

"I am glad that I am stress-free," she said. "Now that I'm accepted, I'm looking at scholarships."

Pugh's school counselor, Debraisha Toney, advises students to be realistic about where they want to go to college.

"Some who want to go to Auburn -- if you have a 2.3 GPA and a 15 on your ACT, it's not realistic," she said.

Aside from grades, Auburn also looks at students' activities and leadership in high school -- such as student government or community service. They also look at their legacy status -- like if their parents attended the university.

"For our academics, we don't have a certain GPA or test score," said Singley, adding that the middle 50 percent of the school's current freshman class had an ACT of 23 to 28.

The school also looks at underrepresented, rural counties in Alabama.

"Some of the larger, more populated counties -- we get more applications," she said. "We are doing a more holistic approach to the application process instead of straight academics."

Auburn looks to accept between 3,500 and 4,000 students. This past year, they accepted 3,974 out of about 18,000 applications, Singley said.

"Generally, it does not grow much more over 4,000," she said. "Applications are fairly flat year after year.

"Our goal when reviewing applications is looking for students who can be successful at this level," Singley said, adding there is not a "formula" used to evaluate students.

Huntingdon College, one of Montgomery's private colleges, has received half of the applications they will accept, said Tommy Dismukes, vice president of the school's admission and financial aid.

The other half will apply through the first week of school in August, but the high-end academic scholarships have a Jan. 31 deadline.

"We have an academic criteria that they have to meet," Dismukes said. "We base applicants primarily on ACT scores. For the honor scholarships, we do look at civic and community involvement."

The last two years, Huntingdon's classes were the largest in the last 40 years. There is a total enrollment at the school of 802 students. There were 306 freshman, transfers and re-admits in the fall of 2008 -- and 318 freshman the year before.

The "typical profile student," Dismukes said, has a 22 ACT and a 3.25 academic GPA.

For any student, "typical" or not, it is not a good time to relax, Eastman said.

"Students applying now need to be pretty quick and efficient about it," she said. "If a student is interested in having as many options available as possible, they need to make sure they are on track."