

Behind Closed Doors What happens to submitted college applications

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Your college application is in the hands of the admissions office, and you feel helpless – or maybe you haven't sent it yet, and you're wondering what's in store for it. What steps will your application go through? Who will see it? What will they look for? What time frame should you anticipate for finding out whether you're admitted?

Have no fear: answers are here. Three college admissions professionals -- John Gaines of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, Marc Williar of Flagler College in St. Augustine, FL and Lynn Gurganus of the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, AL -- agreed to walk us through the steps an application goes through when it arrives in their offices.

The first step, common to all colleges, is processing. Here, the college receives your application, and an admissions employee enters your information into a database. This person then creates a file to contain all the information the college has received or will receive about you. Within a few days to a few weeks of this time, depending on the school's size and the number of applications that are pouring in, you'll receive a letter or some other notification telling you that this has happened.

If you've sent an online application, the process that happens inside the office shouldn't be any different, they said. You may still have to mail some pieces of the application, such as transcripts and recommendations, but you would have had to do that anyway.

If there are any pieces missing from your application – say, your transcript, an essay, test scores or a recommendation – the admissions office will let you know at this point, so that you can work on getting those sent. Then they'll contact you again when your file is complete.

When it is complete, the application is assigned to a reader. This person is usually an admissions counselor for the school, but sometimes may be another academic or professional hired and trained to read applications -- again, depending on the school's size and number of applicants. He or she has the job of looking through your application. This first look is often simply a matter of discovering whether your grades and test scores fall within the school's acceptable ranges.

At Montevallo and many public institutions, the admissions decision is nearly that simple, Gurganus said. Admission is offered if the grades and scores are up to snuff and there are no obvious reasons to the contrary. In borderline cases, admission is either denied or withheld for further examination. In the case of withholding, the student is

usually asked for more information -- for example, a mid-senior-year transcript -- to help admissions officers finalize their decision.

Flagler represents the less competitive type of selective school. After identifying every applicant who can be admitted on the basis of grades and test scores, Flagler's admissions office picks from among these. Three readers are involved with each application that reaches this point, and each reader will vote based on qualitative standards: community service, personal maturity, demonstrated desire and preparedness for a college education.

"Does the applicant, for example, take care of himself physically, get involved in some physical activity? What types of extracurricular activities interest him? Most importantly, does he show any evidence of a willingness to give of himself for others -- any potential for leadership? These are just some of the things we ask," Williar said. "Then we look at the essay and the counselor's recommendation. This is where the student goes from admissible to admitted.

"We try to make it as holistic as possible," he added. "We ask not only 'is this a good student?' but 'is this someone who's a good match for Flagler and who will do well here?' What are the chances of this person staying for four years? How closely does he match the profile of a Flagler student?"

A selective school like Flagler admits one out of every three or four students who apply. By contrast, according to the College Board, at least 10-15 students apply for each spot at the most highly selective schools.

But Vanderbilt, which is more academically competitive and is usually considered a highly selective school, also uses a "holistic" process which is structurally similar to Flagler's and also admits around a third of its applicants, Gaines said.

"I think lots of attention is placed on the most selective schools, and people extrapolate what they hear about those schools to be true across the board. The truth is that most colleges are happy to admit, in fact need to admit, at a higher rate. Nationally, most colleges admit about three-fourths of their applicants," he said.

Some of the confusion may take place, Gaines explained, because people confuse a school's reputation for admitting excellent students with the rigor of its admissions process -- or vice versa.

"For example," Gaines recalled, "when I worked in admissions at Millsap's College, we admitted a very competitive student body -- all with high test scores and solid grades -- yet our admissions process wasn't that harsh. It was just that a certain caliber of applicant tended to come to us."

Vanderbilt's application process is the most complicated of the schools explored here, using a rating system for the whole application, recalculation of GPAs to remove weight

from grades, and rubrics for evaluating each part of each application "so we're not making a capricious decision," Gaines said.

But again, Gaines cautioned, don't equate the complexity of the process with the level of the competition.

Williar agreed. While an in-depth evaluation for candidates can hint something about the level of selectivity, he said, "it's mostly defined by the percentage of applicants you admit. Highly selective colleges have a lot of superior students they're picking from; here we have a large number of admissible students who may not be superior, but are good, but we're picking just as carefully from those."

Even the most discerning colleges must eventually finalize their decisions. There's no set date for this; the only set date is May 1, by which time you need to have chosen a college and notified those you won't be attending that you're going elsewhere. However, some colleges may choose to let you know you're accepted earlier than others, especially if you: (a) applied on an early action or early decision plan, (b) qualified for a university scholarship or scholarship competition, or (c) applied to a college which practices rolling admissions, or a plan of gradually releasing admissions decisions based on when the application is received.