

Colleges Rethink Acceptances of Seniors Who Slacked Off

By Valerie Strauss

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New high school graduates who think they are finished being judged by colleges and universities should think again. Some are in for a big surprise this summer.

In the admissions offices of schools across the country, officials are poring over second-semester senior transcripts in what University of Pennsylvania admissions dean Lee Stetson calls the "D scholar search" -- the hunt for students who slacked off so much that their grades dropped like a stone, or who dropped tough courses for easy ones.

Thousands will receive a stern letter warning them to shape up for college. Many more will be required to explain the slip in their academic performance. Some could be bounced from an honors program or have their admissions postponed.

And some, who felt secure in their place at a selective college, could be booted for good before they begin. That message -- "We wanted you once, but we don't anymore" -- usually comes in a phone call.

"We do look at the final transcripts," said Shannon Gundy, associate admissions director at the University of Maryland at College Park, where officials are beginning to review the records of every one of the 4,125 freshmen the school expects to enroll.

"Our assumption when we offer admission is that they will have the same level of accomplishment throughout the year. . . . It has been necessary in some cases to take action regarding the application," she said.

Colleges and universities inform students on the application or the acceptance letter that admission is contingent on their performance throughout their senior year, though some seniors admit to glossing over that part, or don't believe it when they do read it.

The warning is an attempt to prevent the situation known as "senior slump" or "senioritis," which involves 12th-graders taking an early break from schoolwork -- and in extreme cases, not showing up for classes. The early decision process, in which students receive acceptance letters before Christmas, could be aggravating the problem, some admissions officers said.

Students said they're not surprised when a college revokes admissions after a teenager gets arrested or suspended from school for such unlawful or prohibited activities as drinking.

But though the counselor and teachers stress that colleges are also watching grades -- history teacher Louise Troutner of Broadneck High School in Annapolis said she has conveyed that message over and over -- many students don't believe it, said Renee Sasso, 18, of Miami, who will attend Alfred University in Upstate New York.

That might explain why students "are really surprised" when they hear from a school during the summer about their second-semester grades, said Robert Croot, admissions dean at Cazenovia College in Cazenovia, N.Y. And some are shocked to find that they will be monitored in their freshman year of college, Emory University admissions dean Dan Walls said.

Each school has its own version of the letters that Texas Christian University admissions dean Raymond A. Brown just sent to about 110 members of the expected freshman class of 1,600. They are missives he calls "FOG," or "Fear of God," letters.

One version goes to about 100 and is relatively mild, asking for a letter "detailing the reasons surrounding your senior year performance." A tougher version, which goes to about 10 students every year, demands an explanation and starkly says: "Please understand that your admission to TCU is in jeopardy."

Of those 10, he said, about half won't respond and will be tossed out, and a few of those who do respond will say, "Gee, I don't know what happened," to which Brown said he replies: "Gee, that's just not good enough." Out they go.

The number of students who see their acceptances revoked might be small, but revocations happen routinely at any school that considers itself selective, counselors and admissions directors said. Often, those who find themselves tossed out are notified so late in the summer that their only option is a community college.

"I don't think it [admissions revocation] is that rare if there is a significant drop," said Mary Lee Hoganson, a counselor at Homewood-Flossmoor High School in the Chicago suburbs. ". . . I do indeed have a file in my office called 'Senioritis,' with letters I've collected over 30 years of college counseling where admission has been revoked. We are talking about maybe one or two students a year."

Schools have standards about what constitutes a "significant" drop in grades. Robert J. Massa, vice president for enrollment and college relations at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa., said he recently dealt with "a real tough" case of a National Merit Scholarship winner who failed an Advanced Placement course and received a "D" in two others.

"He just fell off the discipline that won him the National Merit, and we had no choice but to rescind the offer. A real shame," Massa said. When the school gave the student a chance to explain, it learned of a psychological condition that prompted the college to make a deal: The teenager can "redeem himself academically" by attending a community college for the fall semester and achieving at least a 3.0 grade-point average with no grades below B. If he does that, Massa said, he can enter Dickinson in January.

"Typically we won't do that, but because he had some medical issues, we thought it was the right thing to do," Massa said.

Many schools require an accepted student to inform them if the student is receiving a "D" or an "F." Daniel Wright, 18, dutifully did that when he thought he was going to get a "D" in an Advanced Placement biology course at Livingston High School in Livingston, Calif.

Concerned because the University of California had revoked the admission of a friend because of poor grades, Wright said he was relieved when an admissions officer at UC Riverside told him he could still attend the university because only two years of science were required and the biology course was his fourth year. He ultimately received a "C+" in the class.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the new associate provost for enrollment sent a letter for the first time last spring warning applicants to keep up their grades. Stanley Henderson said he was "absolutely flabbergasted" at the response to his letter from high school faculties, which called him to thank him. He also made a formal request to high schools asking for transcripts earlier than usual.

"If we are going to rescind an admissions offer, we want to do that in a timely enough fashion," he said. "You don't want to do it on the day the student moves into the dorm."

Henderson said that the university has always rescinded some admissions based on grades, but that the rate has been in the single digits. "This year that number is expected to go up," he said.

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Dear [REDACTED]

We recently received your final high school transcript. While your overall academic background continues to demonstrate the potential for success, we are concerned with your performance during the senior year, particularly in ~~English~~. University studies are rigorous and we need to know that you are prepared to meet TCU's academic challenges. With this in mind, I ask that you submit to me, as soon as possible but **no later than July 23, 2004**, a written statement detailing the reasons surrounding your senior year performance.

[REDACTED], please understand that your admission to TCU is in jeopardy. If I do not hear from you by the above date, I will assume you are no longer interested in TCU and will begin the process of rescinding your admission.

Please realize that your personal and academic successes are very important to us. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Raymond A. Brown
Dean

RAB:jan

Example of a letter sent to students who fail to perform well during their senior year of high school.

April 22, 2007
ADMISSIONS

Slackers, Beware

The New York Times
nytimes.com

By LAURA PAPPANO

YOU'RE not done.

You may have gotten a thick envelope with a perky congratulatory letter from the college admissions office. You may have told everyone you know (and some you don't) where you're going. You may have your new school hoodie in wardrobe rotation.

You're in, but remember: You're not done.

After being accepted at Franklin & Marshall College, in Lancaster, Pa., Isa Valera spent last spring doing everything, it seemed, but hitting the books. When she wasn't at her two jobs, she focused on prom, graduation from Frederick Douglass Academy in the Bronx and "hanging out with friends for the last time." Her grades fell from 80s and 90s to "barely passing."

Just weeks before classes were to begin, the college got in touch: admissions was rethinking her acceptance. "I was too ashamed to tell my mother," says Ms. Valera. "While she was running around and getting stuff for my room, I was thinking in my head, 'You might not want to do that.'"

Ultimately, Ms. Valera was allowed to enroll — but only after she had written a contrite letter, completed an essay assigned by the admissions office on how she planned to structure her college life and agreed to meet monthly with the dean of admissions.

Senioritis has infected the college-bound since, oh, the beginning of time. But with a high-stress admissions process that begins in ninth grade, today's seniors may be more tempted than earlier ones to let up once they get in.

If anything, though, colleges are extending the admissions period by making sure students stay on track in that twilight between acceptance and arrival on campus.

While colleges and universities have always insisted students maintain top grades, more are now poring over midyear and final transcripts, mailing warnings or making phone calls to students with fallen averages. And in some cases, they're rescinding admission.

Many took note when the University of Washington revoked acceptances last summer for 23 would-be freshmen with poor final high school grades. The university had just moved to a holistic approach to admissions, thoroughly reviewing applications and final grades, as opposed to relying on an index of grade point average and test scores, as most large public universities do.

Officials also mailed out 180 warning letters telling students they were unhappy with their senior-year effort.

Philip A. Ballinger, Washington's director of admissions, calls rescinding acceptances "a matter of fairness."

"If certain students decided they didn't want to be students their senior year, we shouldn't have them here," he explains. Mr. Ballinger, like many higher education experts, is concerned that the emphasis on college admissions is making 12th grade "a wasted year." He hears complaints from high school counselors that once students are accepted they "just slack off."

The University of Colorado at Boulder rescinded admission for 45 students last year, including 10 who had been through freshman orientation, had selected classes and had even met their roommates. "It is the hardest time of year because it's very emotional for families and the students," says Kevin MacLennan, Colorado's admissions director.

The message that a college acceptance is conditional — a point colleges have emphasized to little effect for years — is finally getting a hearing. For one, colleges want students to stay the course and graduate. “You want to be sure you are admitting students who will not struggle academically,” says Susan E. Donovan, dean of admissions at Syracuse University. But they are also applying a more critical eye to final transcripts because waiting lists are bursting. With admissions offices receiving record numbers of applicants, they can insist students stay focused.

Last June 29, Abby Siegel, then a counselor at Stuyvesant High School, heard from a panicked mother after her son’s admission to a liberal arts college on the West Coast was rescinded. His grades had fallen, from the 90s into the 70s. He had blogged about the drop, which alerted the admissions office. (Note to applicants: they do read your blogs.)

“The school had overbooked the freshman class,” says Ms. Siegel, now an independent counselor in Manhattan. “They turned around and said, ‘You are not living up to the standards we expected and you are no longer invited to attend this school.’ ” Although she scrambled and found a city university to take the student, it was hardly his top choice. “This is a bad life lesson to learn,” she says.

This year, the University of Michigan received nearly 27,000 applications for September’s 5,400 freshman spots, the largest class in its history, says Ted Spencer, associate vice provost and executive director of admissions. Incoming freshmen with poor final grades will receive one of three letters. Last year, 62 whose grades fell from A’s to C’s got a gentle warning, encouraging them to “take advantage of the counseling and academic support services offered by the university.” Another 180 whose final grades were C’s, D’s and F’s were told to explain in writing “the events that caused the decline in your performance.” Students had to “provide supporting documentation from a physician, counselor, principal, teacher or any other person who can support your letter of explanation.” In a few cases — nine last year and 11 the previous year — students received letters rescinding admission and suggesting they “are not yet ready to undertake the demanding and competitive programs offered here.”

Mr. Spencer acknowledges that seniors may be burned out or overextended with nonacademic activities. Still, he notes, “we’re seeing more students for a variety of reasons not having strong academic endings.”

Unfortunately for such students, colleges don’t receive final transcripts until June or July and may revoke admission as late as July or August — after students have given up spots at other colleges and have few options. To avoid last-minute surprises, high school counselors advise that accepted students stay in touch about academics.

Steven Roy Goodman, a college admissions consultant in Washington, D.C., says that one student he is advising was admitted early to Northwestern, and once accepted, wanted to lighten her workload. After dropping one Advanced Placement course, she told the college of plans to drop English and take photography. It waved a red flag. If she did, the university would reconsider her acceptance. “She kept the course, which was the right answer,” he says, noting that the communication avoided a potential problem.

Some admissions officials will give slackers a second chance. Franklin & Marshall rescinds a few acceptances each year, but Dennis Trotter, vice president for enrollment and dean of admissions, first allows those students at risk to demonstrate academic seriousness by reading a book and writing a 5- to 10-page essay on it. Last summer, some were assigned to read “Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds,” by Richard J. Light. The admissions staff reads every essay, he says. “We are giving you a task to accomplish. If you basically blow it off and say it doesn’t matter, it’s very likely we will send a letter rescinding the offer.”

The assignment turned out to be a boon for Ms. Valera, who insists the scare of having her admissions rescinded has made her a better student.

“I’m definitely not complacent or nonchalant about my grades or how much time I devote to my studies,” Ms. Valera says, speaking on her cellphone from the lobby of the Shadok-Fackenthal Library, where she was choosing a topic for an economics paper on Sierra Leone. “I don’t want to get another letter saying ‘You should go home now.’ ”

Laura Pappano is author, with Eileen McDonagh, of “Playing With the Boys: Separate Is Not Equal in Sports,” to be published in October by Oxford.

ATTENTION SENIORS!

It's springtime and your college acceptance letter hangs in a place of honor. Prom and graduation are coming up soon, and homework and finals have sunk to the bottom of your priority list. Take care, Seniors, for danger and disappointment lurk in every undone assignment and carelessly written exam.

Colleges believe that you will be the same type of student in college that you are in high school so, if your grades slip, they may begin to rethink their decision to admit you. Your teachers have warned you that colleges have the right to rescind their offer of acceptance. However, unless you know someone who has suffered this fate you might find it hard to believe that any college would be so cruel. Trust me. While rare, it does happen.

Here are some other things that colleges can do to students whose senior year grades slip below the level at which they were accepted:

- deny admission
- defer admission until the student completes a year or semester at another college
- rescind financial aid
- put the student on academic probation
- require the student to repeat a course in summer school
- require the student to defend, in writing or in person, his acceptance
- require the student to meet weekly with the dean or academic advisor
- require the student to submit a 10-page research paper - in two weeks

None of these options is a good way to begin college. Don't let it happen to you.

Even if your grades do not put you in danger of losing your spot in next year's freshman class, you'll cheat yourself out of valuable learning opportunities if you slack off now. Brains work like muscles. The longer you let them rest, the harder it is to get them back in shape. Slack off too much now and fall classes will feel like mini-marathons. Finish school with the same enthusiasm and dedication that earned you strong grades all year and you'll be ready for a successful start to your college career.

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DO NOT LET YOUR GRADES SLIP SENIOR YEAR! I totally slacked off and must have dropped three or four places in class rank. Not only did it cost me the opportunity to be in the top two of the class, but I was wait-listed at my first-choice college and I believe that my grades would eventually have caused me to be denied. I also think that the drop in grades cost me several scholarships.

-- SHEILA CRAWFORD, NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

SENIORITIS: I HAD IT BAD. After I got into Stanford, it was so hard to concentrate on classes because I kept picturing sunny California with palm trees lining the streets. Luckily, teachers were sympathetic as the year ended. I normally wouldn't advocate playing hooky, but for graduating seniors already accepted to college, I'd say reward yourself by "being sick" a couple times so you get to sleep late. Once college hits, you'll wish you had slept more in high school.

-- KATHERINE BELL, STANFORD UNIVERSITY