



Getting to Know Homeschoolers

By Marcia Layton Turner

Misconceptions about homeschooled students abound, including that they are typically socially awkward, sheltered, and conservative. Admission officers who work with them disagree with those descriptors, having found homeschooled applicants to be often academically advanced, curious, and diverse.

Drew Griffin, director of admissions at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, described homeschooled applicants as “highly intelligent, with reading and math levels well above other public and private school applicants.” In fact, for many colleges and universities, they fit in well, quickly become engaged in the social life of the campus, and are highly motivated.

Jen Garrison Stuber, board advocacy chair, Washington Homeschool Organization (WHO), offered three reasons most homeschooled students are strong candidates for college admission: 1) “They’re not burned out from their K-12 experience, and they tend to be both self-motivated and curious about the world,” 2) They are there because they want to be and have a goal in mind, and 3) They are very comfortable seeking out professors for help when a concept isn’t clear since “ignorance in homeschooling isn’t something that’s ridiculed or punished.” The fact is, homeschooled students perform well on standardized tests—typically above the national average—and often enter college having already taken college-level courses. Yet this isn’t the impression all colleges and universities have about this student population.

Myths about homeschooled students likely arose decades ago, when homeschooling was considered unusual. Today, however, with 2.3 million students being homeschooled in the US, according to research reported by the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI), and an annual growth rate of between 2 to 8 percent, homeschooling is becoming more accepted, bordering on mainstream.

Although some families homeschool for religious reasons, a more common reason is the desire to provide a more customized curriculum and learning environment, reports NHERI. Overall, homeschooled students are a diverse bunch. They are Christian, atheist, Mormon, and Buddhist. They are also becoming less dominated by caucasian students, with an estimated 32 percent of homeschooled students coming from African American, Asian, Hispanic, and other non-white families, according to recent research. Homeschooling has become a popular educational option for families of all types.

ENGAGING THE UNFAMILIAR

With this growth comes a larger challenge to admission officers—how to evaluate the content and rigor of homeschool educational records. It is also a challenge for homeschooled applicants and their families to provide acceptable documentation that provides content and context for their learning. Of greatest concern is the high school transcript and course descriptions, which look quite different, said Griffin.

Years ago, lack of familiarity with homeschooling led some institutions to require a general equivalency diploma (GED) of homeschooled students, in addition to SAT or ACT scores. It was another way to try and prove a baseline level of educational achievement. Most schools no longer have that additional requirement, though many homeschooled students do still obtain a GED as an added qualification.

One of the biggest challenges homeschooled applicants face is a lack of familiarity with the college application process and, in particular, the timeline associated with related activities, said Lacy De La Garza, lead admission counselor at the University of Dallas (TX). Since homeschooled students don’t need to follow a state-mandated schedule—there is flexibility in the beginning and end date of their school year, and many go year-round—they aren’t often on the same schedule as public and private

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THE BEST PLACES TO FIND HOMESCHOOLED STUDENTS

Not sure how to connect with homeschooled students? They can be hard to find, say some admission directors, though there are tips and tricks for tracking them down. Here are techniques some schools are using to discover and get in front of potential applicants:

- Turn to testing agencies. Homeschooled students register when they take the college entrance exams and can be marketed to the same way as traditional high school students—by buying a list.
- Tap into local homeschooling associations or networks.
- Join online homeschool message groups—local, state, and parents’ groups.
- Attend or participate in homeschooling conferences.
- Host a reception in the fall for homeschooled applicants and their parents, to explain the application process and to talk about FAFSA.
- Reach out to churches, where homeschooling families may be members.
- Produce a publication specifically for the homeschooled population.

schools, she said. They also don’t hear about when to take the SAT, or when to apply for admission, she said. They aren’t familiar with the process and, for that reason, may miss key deadlines.

The issue of deadlines holds true with respect to financial aid, too. While need-based financial aid is offered based on demonstrated financial need as determined by the FAFSA, merit-based financial aid can be tricky, especially at schools where class rank determines eligibility. Most homeschooled students are ranked first in a class of one. Some schools don’t know how to evaluate that in comparison to other applicants, which can frustrate families.

Being unfamiliar with the college application timeline and requirements also puts some homeschooled applicants at a disadvantage. One way to assist them, suggested De La Garza, is to provide more clearly stated guidelines. Assume homeschooled families know nothing about the process and be crystal clear about what they need to do, and in what order.

“A lot of conversations are about ‘what I don’t know that I need to know,’” she said.

“They require more communication; miscommunication is a big issue.” Nicole Focareto, dean of admissions at Belmont Abbey College (NC), tries to identify homeschool families early on and educate and guide them, so that they don’t fall behind on the admission timeline. “I build a relationship with them,” she said.

The largest complaint De La Garza hears from homeschooling families is the difficulty in finding the appropriate admission representative. Depending on the college or university, the assigned representative might be based on the zip code of the school the student attends, by last name, by zip code of residence, or some other factor. “One woman spent three months trying to find the right person to talk to” at a college her child was interested in, De La Garza said. Creating such barriers discourages students from applying.

What De La Garza has found is that helping homeschoolers navigate the college application process, staying in close touch, and communicating often leads to allegiance—which leads to an application. Institutions with a homeschool admission specialist or liaison on their admission team have an advantage. Not only do they then have an advocate who can provide guidance to students regarding the process itself, but they can also advise them regarding how to respond appropriately to questions related to merit aid.

BOOSTING APPLICATION NUMBERS

Despite assurances from admission officers that homeschooled applicants will be treated just like any other applicant, some families worry that homeschooling will be viewed as different. They may be embarrassed to call attention to it, says director of admission at Wellesley College (MA), Grace Cheng. For that reason, they may not raise their hands to ask questions in front of others during an admission presentation or on a campus tour. Instead, they may seek admission staff members out privately. Being aware of this preference, admission team members may want to create opportunities for private discussions following a presentation.

Belmont Abbey College is making a concerted effort to attract more homeschooled applicants, which already account for 10 percent of its matriculating class. The Catholic college is attending more high school events and college fairs for Catholic students and the college's president is purposely attending more public events to raise Belmont Abbey's visibility among homeschooled families.

This year, for the first time, Belmont Abbey is accepting the Classical Learning Test (CLT) as an option, alongside the SAT and ACT. The CLT is generally more language-focused, explained Focareto, unlike the SAT, which is more correlated with the Common Core. CLT scores are being accepted in part because the test "is more homeschool-friendly."

Belmont Abbey has also developed a new accelerated degree with homeschooled students in mind. In three years, including summer study, students can receive an undergraduate degree. The program is 75 percent on campus and 25 percent online. Since homeschooled students are generally "very self-motivated," Focareto observed, the opportunity to earn a degree faster and potentially save some money in the process, is often quite appealing.

Belmont Abbey also offers dual enrollment to local Catholic high school and homeschooled students. Students can take up to two courses per semester at no charge to give them a taste of what college is like, enabling motivated students to earn college credits even before they enroll. This year, 25 students are enrolled in this program, said Focareto.

DETERMINING FIT


"We're trying to answer the question, 'Is the student prepared to enter and thrive?'" said Cheng. This question is the same whether the applicant is homeschooled or coming from a traditional public school, private school, or boarding school. "We want to know, can a student thrive in our social, residential, and extracurricular world on campus," said Cheng.

Wellesley uses The Common Application and SAT/ACT scores as part of the review process, and the only component that differs for a homeschooled applicant is the school report, which parents or a homeschooling group fills out. If the applicant has already enrolled in local college courses, that transcript is included, too.

Once it has been determined that a student can handle the academic rigor at Wellesley, Cheng considers: "What is she going to add? Can she embrace a new college experience?"

"Homeschoolers have different life experiences," observed Cheng. "We don't treat homeschooled students any differently," she said, but the question Wellesley wants answered is not: "Why homeschooling?" It's: "What did you do with that opportunity?" "No one is admitted because they were homeschooled," she said. Rather, homeschooling is a family educational choice.

The students are also looking for fit, said Focareto. "It's important for college administrators to understand that homeschooled students want to belong: They want to feel part of something." Providing a means for homeschooled students to learn more about an institution, such as earning college credits during the high school years or interacting with college students on campus, helps develop a level of familiarity that can lead to an application.

The interesting thing about the homeschooling community is that it is tight-knit. "If you have one success story, word travels fast," said Focareto. Success breeds more applicants. 

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