

# The Washington Post

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## Inside the admissions process at George Washington University

By Nick Anderson, Published:  
March 22

High school seniors around the country are nervously awaiting college admissions decisions. The Post's Nick Anderson explains a few unexpected factors school officials consider when choosing whom to admit.

Britt Freitag, an admissions officer at George Washington University, confessed she was “slightly nervous” about a candidate for the Class of 2018. His grades were solid, but not stellar.

The student had taken some tough courses, but not as many as Freitag would have liked. Test scores, she said, were “definitely on the low side.”

On the other hand, Freitag told two other officers one recent morning, the student compared favorably to his high school classmates, wrote a good essay, showed impressive determination in activities outside class — and had a family connection to GW.

“I could go either way,” Freitag said.

“Either way what?” asked her colleague, Jim Rogers.

Deny or admit, she said, stumped. Her voice fell to a murmur. “You think maybe he’s a wait-list?”

This is the kind of conversation high school seniors across America wish they could hear but never will. For the past few weeks, teams of gatekeepers at colleges have dissected the academic and personal lives of these students in a matter of minutes to reach decisions that will chart their future.



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College-bound students are on high alert as the Ivy League and other selective schools expect to issue verdicts within days on hundreds of thousands of applications. GW allowed The Washington Post to observe its deliberations in late February, providing a rare view of crunch time inside an admissions shop. It showed how the quest for students with brains, guts and desire shapes both the destiny of the applicants and the selective, private university that hungers to raise its national profile.

Everyone wants the formula for getting in. There is none.

The successful applications withstand probing of every line item, from high grade-point averages to that unfortunate 10th-grade C in chemistry. They also show evidence of a student who actually wants to enroll. But sometimes, what appear to be strengths also can be seen as weaknesses. Here is the back-and-forth:

Look at that gaudy GPA, 4-point-something. *But how is it "weighted"?*

Check out all those Advanced Placement courses. *How many did the student avoid?*

That's a pretty decent SAT score. *What was the math subscore?*

This essay endears him to me. *I'm biased because I think he's charming.*

I think he really could handle the work. He also brings some diversity. *What's giving me pause is that weak 'Why GW' essay.*

With 19,025 applicants, GW probably will admit a little more than 8,300 in hopes of assembling a class of 2,350. Nationally, there are about 350 schools that turn down more than half of their applicants. A few universities are ultra-competitive, with single-digit admission rates, such as Harvard, Stanford and Princeton universities. GW's admissions rate in the recent past has been comparable to those of Northeastern, Lehigh and Wake Forest universities. GW is somewhat less selective than that other private university in the nation's capital with George in the name. (Free tip to GW applicants: Don't refer to Colonials as Hoyas in your essay.)

Selectivity factors into GW's national reputation. In 2012, the university lost its place in the U.S. News & World Report ranking of top national universities after it acknowledged overstating the share of freshmen who were in the top 10 percent of their high school class. Last year, GW returned to the national list, ranked 52nd, close to where it was before.

That episode put a spotlight on the school's admissions. But like most selective colleges, GW keeps its actual decision-making — case studies in a field of maddening subjectivity — behind a veil. Until now.

For all those who ever wanted to eavesdrop on the inner sanctum of competitive admissions — "The Committee" — this is what Yes sounds like in Foggy Bottom:

"Like her rigor, love her personals," GW Admissions Director Karen S. Felton said before moving one New York student's file into the admit pool. "I have 'Leadership!!!!' with four exclamation points. A-B girl. She has a great story. She's a great student. . . . She feels GW to me."

~~Astrid Riecken~~

~~The Washington Post~~

~~Karen S. Felton, left, director of admissions at George Washington University, Kimberley B. Gordy, senior assistant director, and Jim Rogers, associate director, discuss application cases that need further discussion before a final decision can be made.~~

This is the language of No: "The boards are what they are," Felton said of a Pennsylvania candidate's test scores. "They're pretty average. My bigger concern is what looks to be a declining GPA in a very modest senior year. . . . Yeah, I would agree with a deny."

And this is the language of Limbo: "I don't necessarily know that we want to throw him away right now," Felton said of an international prospect who hadn't cleared the bar but might get another shot. "I think he's really interesting. He sounds like a great fit. So, yeah, I would 'possible' him for now."

Felton oversees 22 officers in a floor of cubicles and conference rooms at GW's Rice Hall on I Street NW. A graduate of Goucher College with a master's degree from Syracuse University, Felton worked in admissions at Johns Hopkins University, Georgetown University and the University of Maryland before arriving at GW in 2010. She was raised by a single mother and was the first in her family to go to college, a background that the 47-year-old said gives her "some insight" into certain applicants. "Striver" and "grit" are not just buzzwords for her.

Most of the year, the officers are recruiters. They range across the country and through parts of Europe, Asia and Latin America, spreading the word about a school they hope will leap to mind for anyone who craves the experience of an urban research university with 25,000 students a few blocks from the White House.

In the winter, they hole up and read. A lot. Each officer goes through about 30 files a day, 40 if they're on a roll. Everything is done electronically. Paper was ditched in 2005.

The first read is crucial. GW officers are empowered to admit or deny if the case is clear-cut.

In: The standout student, a mover and a shaker, acs the most demanding curriculum offered, sets the tone for classroom interaction, understands GW.

Out: The so-so student, with few tough classes, an undistinctive personal story and a thin sense of the university.

These are provisional decisions, subject to reshuffling. But Felton makes clear that she gives great weight to the judgment of officers such as Freitag.

A graduate of Hamilton College, 27 years old, Freitag came to GW in 2012 after admissions gigs at Catholic University and the Corcoran College of Art and Design. One morning she set down a can of Illy espresso, popped open her laptop and plunged into files from a high school in the Northeast. GW's standard practice is to read all the applications from a given school consecutively. That means classmates get compared. Contrary to popular belief, she said, there are no admission quotas per school.

~~Astrid Riecken~~

~~The Washington Post~~

~~Britt Freitag, 27, senior assistant director of admissions at George Washington University, sits at her desk, where she reads applications. Freitag and several other "readers" are reviewing about 19,000 applications.~~

"A huge misconception," Freitag called the quota theory. "We read in school groups because then you get more consistency. It's actually more fair." Knowing as much as possible about a student's school and classmates provides essential context, Freitag and other GW officers said.

GW allowed a Post reporter to observe Freitag and her colleagues at work on the condition that applicants and their high schools remain unidentified.

Freitag called up the file of a student who scored about 2000 out of 2400 on the SAT, a very solid mark. She read recommendation letters, jotting down key words to sum up how counselors and teachers feel about the student. "Sometimes they use funny phrases, like, 'She's a real sparkler,'" Freitag said.

She dived into the transcript and started counting. First the number of "core" classes per year a student took in English, math, science, social studies and foreign languages. Not core: classes such as band, physical education and drama. Then the number of AP, honors and International Baccalaureate courses. Then the number of A's and B's in core classes.

"Uh-oh," she said. "Got a D." Freitag made a note.

Every C, D or F in a core class gets discussed in the admissions review. (An F is not a disqualifier. One applicant with an F in math who later made a big comeback was admitted.)

Freitag skimmed the extracurriculars, read the first essay, rated it good. GW also asks students to list a role model and two words to describe themselves. As for herself, Freitag said, she would list "Martha Stewart/Tina Fey" and "sassy/classy." This year, she's seeing a lot of Edward Snowden citations.

She scrutinized a supplementary essay on what excited the student about GW. She noted a campus visit. She called the student's interest solid and specific. Sometimes, she said, applicants write mostly about Washington, D.C., rather than the university. Or they just write about themselves. Not helpful.

At the end, Freitag said she was in "a predicament." Questions about the transcript were balanced by strong test scores and other pluses. "The perfect candidate to come to committee," she said. About half of applications do.

~~Astrid Riecken~~

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~~Karen S. Felton, director of admissions, right, and Britt Freitag, assistant director, discuss application cases.~~

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~~Political science sophomore Colin Davies, 19, takes care of incoming mail sent by applicants at the~~

~~admissions office at George Washington University.~~

Committees vary from one college to another. Some are rather large. Georgetown committees include students and faculty. GW goes for efficiency. Typically its committees are made up of three people. One officer presents files; two listen and respond.

When they're humming, Felton said, committees can decide 20 or more cases an hour. Three minutes apiece to resolve files on the bubble.

Chatter in the President's Room on the second floor of Rice Hall was rapid-fire the next morning as various officers took turns presenting to Rogers and Felton. It was too early to break out the usual committee fuel: Skittles. Rogers, 31, a veteran of political campaigns and Bentley University admissions, brought a can of sugar-free Red Bull.

First the presenters recounted "rec-words" from counselors and teachers, to give an initial sense of applicants from those who know them well. One was said to be "balanced, open to risks, a good time manager," another "conscientious, compassionate and detail-oriented." Recommenders called a third "intelligent, affable, determined, a caring young woman, really sweet" and said she "has a 'wow' factor."

Next came summaries of course-and-grade tallies compiled from transcripts, test scores, highlights from extracurriculars, educational attainment of parents, a summary of essays and other items that struck a chord. Sometimes race or ethnicity was mentioned. If a student was a "first-gen," shorthand for first generation in the family to go to college, that came up. Same if a student held down a job. Same if there was a disciplinary record.

The committee agonized over an applicant who got into a disciplinary scrape as a sophomore but had been a straight arrow since. "I know it was 10th grade, but I don't know, it's a little bothersome to me," Felton said.

The officers took a dim view of students who were coasting as they finish high school. One seemed to be "taking a lighter senior year," Kimberley Gordy said. "That, therefore, makes the straight A's less distinctive." The candidate was destined for the waiting list.

Gender came up. About 55 percent of GW undergraduates are female. Several times, officers pointed out that a candidate was male. Rarely did that happen with female applicants. "We have fewer males in the pool," Felton said afterward. That doesn't mean men get an edge, she said. "But I notice it when it's being presented."

Officers noted which students were the children of lawyers and which had parents who were a cook and a housekeeper. But there was no discussion of financial need. Before making final decisions, GW planned to run a total need analysis for the class Felton wants to admit. The goal is to ensure there is enough money to help needy students attend a university where tuition, fees and room and board top \$58,000 a year. At that point, some tentative decisions might be reversed to boost the financial-aid budget. That could help a few borderline students from affluent families.

Last year, senior associate provost for enrollment management, Laurie Koehler, acknowledged this "need-aware" policy, which is common nationally. Her statement caused a stir. Previously, the

university had claimed that aid requests did not affect admissions decisions. Koehler, who came to GW in 2013 after heading admissions at Bryn Mawr College, knew the claim didn't square with practice. So she set the record straight.

~~Astrid Riecken~~

~~The Washington Post~~

~~Karen S. Felton, right, director of admissions at George Washington University, and Laurie Koehler, senior associate provost for enrollment management, are reviewing about 19,000 applications.~~

Transcripts got far more scrutiny than tests. "Grades and rigor trump scores," Felton said.

But officers complain that some schools seem allergic to giving out any marks lower than an A or a B. "The grade pool is so inflated, watered-down, it doesn't really mean much," one said.

Test scores provide backup in those situations. Last year, the middle half of all SAT scores for students admitted to GW ranged from 1840 to 2060. The committee frequently alluded to this range, part of what is known as GW's "profile."

"B student," Felton mused over one. "Scores slightly below profile. But she does bring some diversity, and she's interested." Verdict: wait-list.

Family connections came into play a few times. The file that had stumped Freitag tied Felton and Rogers in knots, too.

"I'm going to go out on a limb," Felton said. "Male. Solid rigor. B student." She hesitated. "Aayyy. . . I'm gonna agree." Green light: admit. The officers were mindful of how much each admission means to a university that wants to rise from the pack. GW now needs this student to say yes, too.

"Better come," Rogers said.

"He better come, yeah," Felton said.

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

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Subject: Fwd: See the essay as a screenplay of your life  
To:  **Sara Bauer**

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Sat, Jan 07, 2012 10:04:31 AM  

Hi Sara,

I thought this might be of interest for your summer workshop. Yvonne

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Jack Scheidell** <[jscheidell@comcast.net](mailto:jscheidell@comcast.net)>  
Date: Sun, Nov 20, 2011 at 6:43 PM  
Subject: See the essay as a screenplay of your life  
To: WiredCounselor <[WiredCounselor@googlegroups.com](mailto:WiredCounselor@googlegroups.com)>, NJSCA <[njsca@yahoogroups.com](mailto:njsca@yahoogroups.com)>

## See the essay as a screenplay of your life

Published in: Lee Bierer CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

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More information

Over the years I've written dozens of articles on how to write a great college essay and read just about every book and article on the subject. But recently I found something new.

Robert Cronk, author of "Concise Advice: Jump-Starting Your College Admissions Essays" has something different to say. He advises students to think about their essay as a screenplay. He says, "Essays are not term papers ('documentaries' in film-speak). They are stories by which the audience (the reader) will get to know the main character. And that main character is you."

Cronk suggests following these 10 steps when getting started on the college essay.

Step 1: Close your eyes and walk down memory lane. Try to create an event timeline of your life - the good, the bad, the ugly and definitely the funny.

Step 2: Make a list of those moments that stand out. Here's one possibility - "that time on the mission trip when they made me room with someone I didn't know and despite our differences we became good friends." Don't think you have to impress the admissions officers by boasting about your accomplishments. You're better off telling an interesting story about you.

Step 3: Close your eyes again and visualize yourself back in those moments. Try to remember all the details of the events - what was said, how you felt, etc.

Step 4: Describe those moments in words. Just write without judging your work; get your thoughts down and then review.

Step 5: Determine what each of those moments meant to you. How did you change because of that moment? Why are you different now? What new insights do you have about yourself?

Step 6: Choose one of the moments for your essay and turn your description into a polished paragraph. Write a solid description of the moment.

Step 7: Write the end of the essay. Yes, this is where you think about how you want the essay to end up. Writing the ending first will make writing the middle of the essay much easier.

Step 8: Fill in the in-between. Write the guts of the essay. Think about your transitions between paragraphs and try to create "bookends" by using a reference made in your introduction at the end of your essay. Linking the beginning and the end of your essay is a fairly sophisticated writing technique that alerts the reader that you gave the essay a lot of thought.

Step 9: Polish the essay. Review, revise and rest. Repeat and repeat again.

Step 10: Let others read it. Ask for comments but don't change the "voice" of the essay. Make sure it still sounds like you, and, most important, ask yourself if anyone else could have written this essay. When the answer is "no," smile and submit.


Lee Bierer is an independent college adviser based in Charlotte.

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MAKE IT A GREAT DAY!

J Scheidell



From:  Yvonne Hourihan <yhourihan@gmail.com>

Thu, Jan 12, 2012 7:17:27 PM 

Subject: Fwd: wave of quirkiness and brevity that has swept the usually staid world of col

To:  **Sara Bauer**

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Hi Sara,

I don't think this applies to many of the schools our students apply to however I was surprised that this is a question for University of Maryland! Yvonne

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Jack Scheidell** <[jscheidell@comcast.net](mailto:jscheidell@comcast.net)>

Date: Mon, Jan 9, 2012 at 11:04 AM

Subject: wave of quirkiness and brevity that has swept the usually staid world of college admissions essays

To: WiredCounselor <[WiredCounselor@googlegroups.com](mailto:WiredCounselor@googlegroups.com)>, NJSCA <[njsca@yahooglegroups.com](mailto:njsca@yahooglegroups.com)>

Detroit Free Press - Dec 26, 2011

[Marker]

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By Bonnie Miller Rubin

Chicago Tribune

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Schaaf had to answer this question from Yale: "What would you do with a free afternoon tomorrow?" / Photos by Scott Strazzante/Chicago Tribune

Let's say you are confronting one of the most important decisions of your life. But first, you must describe your favorite thing about last Tuesday.

And do it in 25 words or less.

The query may seem like it's taken from Twitter or an online dating survey, but it is designed for a match of a different sort: Getting into college.

The essay question is new for 2012 applications to the University of Maryland and is just one example of a wave of quirkiness and brevity that has swept the usually staid world of college admissions essays in recent years. Some colleges have added questions that might elicit answers more suitable for a text or Tweet, and others have introduced video to the process.

With deadlines looming at numerous top-tier schools, many high school seniors who have struggled with writer's block are now in official panic mode. The traditional "Why this school?" treatise is still a fixture on most applications, but today's high school seniors also are grappling with:

Imagine you have to wear a costume for a year of your life. What would you pick and why? -- Brandeis University in Massachusetts.

What is your favorite ride at the amusement park? How does this reflect your approach to life? -- Emory University in Atlanta.

"Colleges have really thrown us a curveball," said Eric Apgar, director of guidance at Sandburg High School in Orland Park, Ill. "In years past, we would tell students not to veer too far from the middle, to not be too strange ... but it seems like that's exactly what post-secondary institutions want."

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It's not just about appealing to the text/Twitter/YouTube generation, but about taking another opportunity to get acquainted with the applicant, said college consultant Katherine Cohen and founder of IvyWise.com.

"You really get a totally different feel for who that person is, especially with the short takes. It allows colleges to learn things Instant Messageadrom a transcript and résumé," she said. "That's why they're fun."

"I thought the University of Chicago ones were fun. I like that they give you so much fun to be creative," said Colette Berg, a 17-year-old Detroit senior at all-girls Mercy High in Farmington Hills.

She chose to answer a U-Chicago prompt that asked: Describe a time you found something you weren't looking for.

"I actually talked about how I went on a retreat in France and how I grew in faith, even though I wasn't expecting to learn anything about faith in France, because they're not known for being particularly

religious," explained Berg.

On the Yale application, when asked about what she'd do if she had a free afternoon tomorrow, Berg shared a Detroit treat.

"I said I would ride my bike to the Detroit Institute of Arts with a friend, and I talked about how cool the Diego Rivera murals are," said Berg.

She has been accepted at University of Chicago, and is waiting to hear from Yale.

Quirky questions irk Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

"It just reinforces that there's some secret code that needs to be cracked to gain admission," he said. "How angry would an adult be if we had to answer these kind of bizarre questions on a

job application?"

Colleges are entering the offbeat realm for a variety of reasons, say experts. As more have signed on to the Common Application -- the online admissions form that can be sent to multiple schools -- they've added supplemental questions as a way to get beyond the generic and stand out from the crowd.

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"It's put great stress on kids, who now have a lot more questions to answer," said Marybeth Kravets, a longtime college counselor.

In yet another nod to social media, this is the first year that the University of Dayton prospects have the option of submitting a video essay in lieu of a written one, joining Tufts and George Mason universities.

Dayton applicants will answer the question "What does it mean to be a servant leader?" and then share their videos through Facebook, Twitter and other sites. Students who garner the most votes will receive a \$40,000 scholarship over four years.

"We can't just do things the same old ways," said Sundar Kumarasamy, a vice president at the Catholic school, adding that applications are already running 30% ahead of last year.

Josh Skwaczyk of Sandburg, Ill., is applying to a half-dozen schools. He recalled perusing the topics and being stumped. Even the standard "How did you find out about our school?" left him

scratching his head about the best approach.

"Should I send it in declarative or quirky? Is this an opportunity to show some flair? I'm at this fork in the road, where I could go in one direction or the other ... where I have to do all this internal analysis," said the senior.

Shea Schaaf, who ranks first in her senior class at Shepard High School in Palos Heights, Ill., tried to not get too frazzled by the application process, nibbling away at the topics a little bit at a time.

"Once you get into it, it's easier to be creative...I just tried to see it as a way to tell them a little bit more about me ... to leave my mark," she said. "You don't want to be just another student who writes clichés."

Schaaf is juggling six AP classes, sports and other activities. She applied to Harvard, Princeton, MIT, Chicago and Northwestern universities and also Yale, which asks a question of pure fantasy given her busy schedule:

What would you do with a free afternoon tomorrow?

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