

Homeschooling Comes of Age in College Admission

Aaron Basko

Last year, the University of Arizona system considered implementing a minimum SAT requirement for homeschoolers to receive guaranteed admission. According to the *Arizona Daily Wildcat*, President Peter Likins argued against it as something unnecessary, since homeschooled applicants were already attractive candidates. He noted that homeschoolers are already admitted at extremely high rates, citing the previous year, when the university admitted 20 of its 24 homeschooled applicants—well above normal admission percentages. “Send them our way,” Likins said. “We love our homeschoolers.”

While a few families may be disappointed that the SAT minimum was not adopted in Arizona, homeschoolers around the nation benefit more from the underlying message. Without any special rules or outside pressure, colleges are very interested in homeschooled applicants. As the number of homeschooled applicants rises and homeschooled students continue to more clearly present their accomplishments, colleges are responding with enthusiasm.

Growing Interest

The University of Arizona is not alone in its interest in homeschoolers. On the other side of the country, West Virginia Wesleyan College, a liberal arts college of 1,500 students, is also hoping to increase the number of homeschoolers who enroll. “We tend to attract about four to five students per year,” says Bob Skinner, Director of Admission and Financial Planning. “Since this is a fast-growing population, it is our hope we can triple that number in the very near future.”

West Virginia Wesleyan has tried to make the application process more streamlined for homeschooled applicants by dropping a previous GED requirement. Mr. Skinner’s staff also has plans to add instructions for homeschoolers to all its admission materials. “We’ve tried to make the application process very straightforward.” Skinner is also considering targeted magazine advertising to better reach the homeschool population.

At both of these institutions and at most colleges and universities around the nation, homeschoolers make up only a tiny fraction of applicants. So why the increased interest?

A Growing Market—With Benefits

“We have seen a growing number of students with this educational background, and for those competitive for admission, they have thrived,” says Woody O’Cain, Director of Admission at Furman University in South Carolina. Furman has approximately 15 homeschoolers in its student body of 2,650.

As the number of applications from homeschoolers has grown, O’Cain and other admission officers have had positive experiences with homeschoolers who have been

successful both academically and socially. In many ways the generation of homeschoolers attending college over the past ten years has paved the way for today's students. In the competitive admissions environment, a new source of qualified applicants who are likely to succeed is very welcome, especially if it promises significant growth or brings additional benefits.

The growth trends for the homeschooling population are undeniable. A July 2004 study released by the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that nearly 1.1 million US students were homeschooled as of the spring of 2003, an increase of 29% from the estimated 850,000 homeschoolers in the spring of 1999. Homeschoolers are now estimated to represent 2.2% of the total school-age population. As their numbers grow, homeschoolers are finding that colleges are paying more attention.

Another benefit is standardized test scores. Over the last few years, homeschoolers have tended to score better as a group than students from more traditional schools. In 2004, the average ACT composite score for homeschoolers was 22.6, compared to 20.9 for all other students. Although the College Board, the maker of the SAT test, does not currently release homeschool-specific data, the Home School Legal Defense Association indicates that the average SAT score for homeschoolers has topped that of students from traditional schools each year from 1999 to 2002.

“Test scores are usually very high,” says John Carroll, Director of Admission at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. Since standardized test scores affect the perception of a college's selectivity, both among peers and in ranking publications such as *U.S. News & World Report*, high scoring students are in demand. Carroll says the trend of higher scores among homeschoolers in Kalamazoo's applicant pool is one reason that their acceptance rate is above average.

Diverse Experience

Carroll also points to other, less quantifiable reasons why homeschoolers make attractive candidates. “Homeschoolers typically are supplementing their home instruction with college courses, private tutoring—especially helpful for languages and sciences—international enrichment experiences, and community service projects.” In addition, he feels they bring “varied experience and often a more purposeful approach to their education. There seems to be more thought given to the direction and depth of their education, rather than the typical public school students who accept a series of requirements and plod toward their completion.”

O'Cain says Furman has also experienced the less tangible benefits of homeschool students, pointing to the practical aspects of a less traditional structure. “Their schedule also allows for more freedom and flexibility as far as their extracurricular experiences. One example a few years ago was a student who was very interested in marine biology. This student was able to secure an internship for a month in Hawaii during the regular ‘school year.’ This would not have likely been possible for a student who was enrolled in a common high school.”

Bruce Chamberlin, Associate Director of Admission at the University of Pennsylvania, agrees that homeschooled students can use the flexibility of their education to their benefit. “We especially like to see a homeschool student take advantage of the opportunities afforded by circumstances. I recall one student studying history, literature, and geology and then taking a cross-country trip with her grandmother to visit various cities she had read about, following portions of different pioneers’ trails, and touring land formations she had studied. She made the country her laboratory, literally.”

The University of Pennsylvania, like most colleges and universities, does not have a formal program of outreach to homeschoolers. Chamberlin feels that the university has a responsibility to be a resource for the homeschool community, however. He has been a frequent presenter at the annual conference of Pennsylvania Homeschoolers, one of the largest homeschool support networks in the region.

Bruce is quick to point out that the University of Pennsylvania sees a wide variety of homeschool applicants. As with all applicants to such highly selective institutions, it is the homeschooling student’s task to demonstrate both strong skills in traditional academic areas and compelling ways in which the student will contribute to the university’s community. Applicants need objective measures, such as test scores, detailed documentation of the methods of evaluation, and letters of recommendation to be successful in the admission process, but Chamberlin also suggests that it is often the homeschooler’s ability to contextualize his or her education that gives him the most information. “If the candidate can present us with a persuasive statement of purpose for his homeschooled experience, then he has already learned one of the most important lessons any college or university could teach a student: to take ownership and responsibility for one’s education.”

The Beginnings of Homeschool Recruitment

Some colleges, including many community colleges, are actively pursuing homeschool students for the combination of benefits they offer. “We strive to create an environment of diversity at PBCC,” says Trina Wagnac, Outreach Program Specialist at Palm Beach Community College. “Homeschoolers contribute to this effort by bringing another form of secondary education experiences into our post-secondary setting. Naturally, they bring an additional source of applications and have the capacity to increase enrollment.”

Wagnac says that Palm Beach Community College’s long history with homeschooled students has led to a combination of direct and indirect recruitment to attract them as applicants. “Direct recruitment strategies to homeschoolers include participation in annual events such as ‘Back to School Day,’ which is hosted by Parents Educating Children (PEC). College information is shared directly with parents and their children. They gain a better understanding of the opportunities available to them. Among these is our Dual Enrollment program, which allows students to earn college credits while completing their high school course work.” PBCC is also involved with the Family

Action Network (FAN), which hosts a number of education fairs throughout the academic year in collaboration with the school district of Palm Beach County.

“Another form of recruitment involves inviting the prospective students to PBCC for events such as Pantherfest that showcase our academic programs, college resources, and student organizations. Our advertising efforts include billboards, newspaper and television commercials. These ads target and reach a wide audience including homeschoolers.”

Although community colleges may be leading the pack in the active recruitment of homeschooled students, other colleges and universities are considering ways to better reach this market as well. A December 14 report in the *Des Moines Register* chronicled the rise of homeschooler applications at both Iowa State University and the University of Iowa. Not only has the volume of applications increased at both universities, but the applicants are presenting credentials that are as strong as or stronger than those of more traditionally educated students. According to the article, Iowa State’s Phil Caffrey, Senior Associate Director of Admission, reported that the university’s positive experiences with currently enrolled homeschoolers has led him to consider plans to actively pursue this population, including attending homeschool-specific college fairs. Doing so would be an unusual use of time and resources for a group that makes up less than half of one percent of the university’s applicants.

Learning from Experience

The other major factor in the increased interest of colleges in homeschool students is the knowledge and experience that admission offices have gained in assessing homeschooler credentials. Robert McGann, Director of Admission at the University of New Hampshire, notes that the way admission offices read homeschooler applications has changed. “I believe that most colleges, including UNH, are much more comfortable working with homeschooled students now, relative to 5-10 years ago. The growth and acceptance of other high school learning environments, such as charter schools, forces admissions offices across the country to spend more time interpreting the preparation and opportunities offered by a wider range of high school environments.”

McGann feels the additional time required is worth it. “Homeschooled students offer different perspectives to our university community. The qualities that make them successful as homeschooled students—independence, curiosity, some appreciation for interdisciplinary learning, etc.—also make them successful college students.”

Homeschool families have more options at their disposal than in previous decades, and many include elements such as courses at local colleges, small group instruction through homeschool coops, and internships in their curriculum. Homeschoolers are also learning to use SAT II subject tests, letters of recommendation from supplemental instructors, and online resources to their advantage, all of which give admission personnel confidence that homeschooled students can succeed in a variety of academic environments. As

Kalamazoo's Carroll puts it, "We see greater involvement beyond the home instruction, and this is a departure from ten years ago."

Ellen Goulding, Associate Director of Admission at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, clarifies, "Certain areas of study can be very hard to assess—especially science, math, and foreign languages. When a student says he's had chemistry, what does that mean? Does it include lab experiences? What topics were covered? Sometimes homeschooling families get concerned that colleges put significant weight on standardized test scores and college courses, but it is essential that we be able to put a student's education in a more national context. When combined with a detailed description of what they studied at home, it helps us judge how well prepared a student is. When we can tell that preparation is there, we are very interested in those students—not specifically because they are homeschooled students, but because they are great students."

The message is clear: opportunities abound for homeschoolers who can demonstrate their academic accomplishments and present their unique qualifications. As homeschoolers become more confident in presenting the benefits of their education, colleges are listening.

Biographical Information

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