

In the Mix: Homeschoolers and Higher Education

Claire Novak

Today's homeschooling parents are provided with an abundance of curriculum to help educate their young children. But when it comes to college, they often wonder what requirements their student will have to meet. What do admissions officers look for when they review an application? How are unconventional students treated? Most importantly, how can a homeschooled high schooler prepare for continuing education?

The answers to these and a host of other questions lie undiscovered when one catches a glimpse of traditional college life. For many students, approaching an unknown college can be somewhat intimidating. But when a homeschooler digs deep enough into college admissions rules to come up with concrete answers, they often discover pure gold.

The Ideal College Candidate

Admissions officers look for many different characteristics when they review student applications. While requirements vary greatly from college to college, there are two main qualities that increase a student's chances of being accepted. Strangely enough, often these qualities have nothing to do with academics. Colleges are looking for students who have strong character and a determined drive to pursue their passions.

"We value independent learning at the college level and we expect students to do a lot of learning outside of the classroom setting," said Roscoe Smith, Director of Admissions at Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio. "Homeschoolers have learned to be independent learners and thinkers, so they fit in very well." In a TOS interview, Smith acknowledged the dedication shown by homeschoolers. "Homeschooled students are typically a very good fit with the kind of student that we're looking for at Cedarville," he said. "[We're looking for] someone who takes their personal faith very seriously but is also motivated academically."

According to Hannah Weiss, an admissions officer at Harvard University, a student's excellence in academics doesn't necessarily point to strong character. Speaking to TOS, Weiss made it clear that interest in extracurricular activity is a must. "We're looking for leadership, intellectual passion, all those qualities. Students who are exceptional in the classroom are great, but we want to see them feeling the need to be involved and passionate in something else as well."

"A Class by Themselves", an article by Christine Foster in the November/December 2000 issue of *Stanford Magazine*, states that homeschoolers have an advantage over traditional students since "they have consciously chosen and pursued an independent course of study." In 1999, Stanford University gave its highest internal ranking for intellectual variety to two homeschoolers. The highest rating for math – reserved for the top 1 to 2 percent of the school's applicants – was given to four homeschoolers. Why did the homeschooled students do so well? Officials at Stanford believe that the

distinguishing factor is intellectual vitality. As one admissions officer put it, “These kids have [great intellect], and everything they do is responding to it.”

Homeschooled? No Problem, Say Admissions Officers

While some colleges (like Stanford) keep separate or marked files for students who were homeschooled, others don’t even bother to categorize these students on their own.

“We have, for quite a while, had homeschooled students,” said Hannah Weiss. “We don’t treat them any differently than a traditional student. We really don’t keep track of how many homeschoolers we have, just because we don’t have a separate admissions process.” At Harvard, there is only a small difference allowed for homeschooled students, and it is found in the application process. Homeschoolers may submit lists of curriculum, reading lists, and other detailed descriptions of course study rather than a typical high school transcript. Otherwise, they’re still required to submit teacher recommendations and standardized test results.

According to information from Illinois’ Wheaton College, accepting homeschooled students is old hat. “Wheaton College has enrolled many homeschooled students in recent years,” read their admissions guidelines. “Nearly ten percent of our current freshmen were homeschooled at some point, and about a dozen were homeschooled through high school. We encourage homeschooled students to consider Wheaton.”

Dr. Brian Ray at the National Home Education Research Institute (NHRI) says that most colleges welcome homeschoolers and want to accommodate them. In fact, he told TOS that homeschoolers should have no problem getting into a college, because “The truth in America is that if you have money and you want to go to college...if you have decent test scores and a warm body, you can get in!” Ray agrees that homeschoolers are usually treated as equals with their traditionally educated peers. “[Colleges are]...interested in making sure that students take the SAT or ACT and get the same score as anyone does. They’ll want to know whether the person was involved in extracurricular activities. It’s highly variable if they want a transcript or personal essay or an interview. The more prestigious the school is, the more they’re going to demand.”

Helping Homeschoolers Serve Their Country

Military Academies are also very willing to accept homeschooled students, although their admissions procedures may be more rigorous than the standard college. Athletics play a huge role in admissions at military schools where large percentages of each new class have participated in high school sports or earned varsity letters. Candidates at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs and the United States Military Academy at West Point must pass the Physical Aptitude Exam (PAE), a test of strength, agility, speed, and endurance. The PAE is used to judge how well a student will handle the military’s grueling physical program – a challenge that some homeschoolers find hard to meet.

“[Homeschoolers] have always been pretty well qualified academically,” said Rolland Stoneman, Associate Director of Admissions at the Air Force Academy. “[But] athletics play a major role in our program. We use their athletic participation not just to judge their physical ability, but as a means of helping us determine character, leadership, tenacity – all of the things that make a good candidate.”

At West Point, admissions officers are more concerned with the leadership qualities that a student possesses. “The students that come in through a homeschool program...fit in well,” Colonel Jones, Admissions Director at West Point told TOS. “We believe that demonstrated leadership in high school is very important...they’re showing the ability to step up and take responsibility when others fail. Leadership is really important to officers in the Army – and for a brand-new lieutenant going into a platoon...especially if that platoon is in combat, leadership has got to be a given. If [leadership is] demonstrated early on, it’ll probably come through and we can improve on that.”

The opinion of military academies is probably best summed up by Rolland Stoneman’s statement to *The Old Schoolhouse Magazine*: “While we’re not actively recruiting homeschoolers, the numbers are definitely increasing,” he said. “We want to help them succeed. There are a lot of kids out there with a desire to serve their country, and we’re certainly going to help them do that.”

Admissions tips

Advice on how to get admitted to different colleges varies just as much as different admissions processes, but there are three factors that remain the same no matter where you go. A student must have a good SAT or ACT score in order to get into almost every college. The one exception to this rule may be found at community colleges, most of which require an English and Math Proficiency test. The more prestigious the school, the higher your test scores must be. Extracurricular activities are also a big plus – they show a willingness to pursue your passions and beliefs.

Brian Ray believes students need to consider college requirements early, so they can plan to meet those requirements while in high school. If you want to get into certain places, you need to have shown certain experiences,” he told TOS. “You have to be prepared for that.”

At West Point, leadership is very important, and students will not gain high consideration unless they’re shown initiative. Speaking to young homeschoolers, Colonel Jones recommends, “Along with the great education that [you’re] already going to get, join Boy or Girl Scouts and get involved in that. Get involved in your church ministry, become a club officer...all of these positions get you more consideration.”

At the Air Force Academy, it’s very important to have a past athletic record, even if it doesn’t involve typical sports like football or basketball. According to Rolland Stoneman, “We recognize that most homeschoolers are not going to have the typical athletic activities available to them, but anybody can put on a pair of Nike shoes and a pair of

running shorts and go run. We'll recognize that they've done that, we assume they've trained for it, and we'll count it as cross-country."

At Harvard, teacher recommendations are a must, but they can't come from the student's parent. Admissions officers suggest that homeschooled students enroll in a class or two at a local community college and gain recommendation from someone who is used to evaluating a large amount of students. Work at a community college can also be an effective way to experience the college scene without committing to an extensive program.

Wisdom from College Grads

27-year-old Shannon Gibert is the oldest of six children. Her parents began homeschooling in 1984 when the movement was still in its infancy. Shannon knew she would be a teacher from a very young age, and because of her home education, she was able to spend most of her senior year of high school as a teacher's assistant. That senior year furthered her passion for teaching, but she wanted to do something more than teach—she wanted to make a difference.

"I got into special education because I knew I wanted to do something more than just regular education, I wanted to reach a different group," Shannon told TOS. She transferred into Northeastern Illinois University after beginning her college studies at a local community college. "I chose [Northeastern] because it was local and was a school that I could work with financially," Shannon said.

One of the biggest transitions for me was learning how to be in a group rather than alone. I had to adjust to being in a classroom of 30 people because I usually worked very independently at home. I had to adjust to the structure of a public school setting, but academically it was much easier than I expected it to be."

Shannon recommends taking some sort of a practice standardized test – whether a practice SAT or ACT or something in a public school format – just to get used to the way it works. "That was something I didn't do, and when it came to test time I had a little bit of anxiety because I wasn't used to that," she said, "I also think students should talk to people who have already been to college and gain any type of advice that they can give you; advice about professors, school life, study habits, anything."

After graduating in 2003, Shannon found a job right away. "It was really easy for me, because I did student teaching in the district that I'm teaching in now," she said. "When I was a student teacher I met people and made contacts, and when I graduated I was able to take that information and take my contacts and get a job. Because they're such a high demand for teachers, especially special education teachers, it's pretty easy to find a job." Now Shannon shares her love for learning and helps those with difficulties working as a Special Education Teacher with a focus on learning disabilities and behavioral disorders.

21-year-old Kenton Skarin was homeschooled from 3rd grade to 12th grade. He entered North Central College in Illinois and progressed rapidly due to Advanced Placement Tests, graduating Summa Cum Laude in 2003. When adjusting to college life and classes, Kenton found that he managed the stress better than many traditionally schooled students. “I personally felt that I was at a great advantage over students that came from traditional classroom settings,” he told TOS. “You need to learn very quickly in college how to motivate yourself. In public high school, students had someone who would tell them, ‘Don’t forget, assignments are due at the end of next week!’ That kind of thing doesn’t happen in college. They might remind you once somewhere along the way but you basically have to figure out your own schedule and study methods. It took a lot of students six months to a year to get comfortable with something that I was already able to do.”

Kenton found that students from different schooling backgrounds were always interested in his opinion on various subjects. Whenever he said, “I was homeschooled,” the typical response was, “Cool! That must have been fun!” Students accepted him for who he was as a person, rather than focusing on his educational background. In Kenton’s words, “[College] was different, but in a positive way.”

“Be absolutely certain that you know what you believe and why you believe it,” Kenton tells future college students. “College will challenge you in just about every area that you can think of. I really recommend David Noebel’s *Understanding the Times*. Read the book in its entirety – that’s one of the things I did to prepare for college and I was very grateful for what it had to say. Consider that advice if you’re attending a Christian college as well. Often, students discover the same kinds of humanist philosophy creeping into Christian college. If you read Noebel’s book, you’ll be able to recognize that as it comes down the line toward you.

“I would also say that, at least for me, it was a very great benefit to be able to live at home while I attended college...to come home at night and have a family who supported the values I believed in, instead of having to be the ‘Lone Ranger’ and go back to my dorm room and get up the next day without that support. I know there were times when I needed to have someone say that they believed in me, or that they were praying for me, or that they were in agreement with the different stands that I had to take in college classrooms. If it’s possible for a student to live at home, I think it’s a very great benefit. Being able to maintain my relationships with my siblings and having very strong Christian support from my parents vastly outweighed any other benefits I could have gained by living on campus.”

College prepared Kenton for his ultimate goal – to study at Northwestern University of Law. If his application is accepted, he plans to go there this fall. Currently, he serves as a debate coach for a NCFCA High School Policy Debate team, an historic military vehicle technician at McCormick’s 1st Infantry Division Museum in Wheeling, Illinois, and an intern/editor for the Illinois State Bar association’s Alternative Dispute Resolution Newsletter, *In the Alternative*.

The Next Generation

The first homeschooling parents brought their children home for many different reasons. There were some who believed they could give their children a better education than what the public schools had to offer. Other had children who struggled with the poor learning environment that a classroom provided. Then there were those who objected to what public schools were teaching, wanting to develop character and a Christian worldview through their own studies. Whatever the reason, they wanted to do what was best for their children; they paved the way for future generations.

Today, those first homeschooled students are finishing their college education, maintaining successful careers, and raising young families of their own. They've demonstrated that the love of learning still exists; that passion and dedication are not lost qualities. From the universities and academics of this nation come heartfelt requests, "Send us more homeschoolers!" The call will be answered. America's next generation of homeschooled students is ready – and willing – to pick up the torch.

Biographical Information

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