

Transcripts, CLEPs, and Other Ways to Get into College

Claire Novak

Adam Carman is a junior at Houghton College, a Christian liberal arts college in western New York State. Majoring in historical studies, the 20-year-old New York native has been named once to the college Dean's List and twice to the Dean's Honor List within four successive semesters. His success in college is all the more impressive due to the non-traditional twelve years he spent in a homeschooling program with his three siblings.

When Carman began 10th grade, he had no idea he would spend his post-high-school years at a relatively well-known college. In fact, he was taking distance learning courses over the Internet when his teacher encouraged him to consider pursuing a traditional degree. At 16, Carman adapted his educational plans to gear toward entrance into college. With a good SAT score, detailed record keeping, and a dynamic application essay, he made a relatively easy transition into mainstream college life—just like many homeschoolers before him.

Colleges Seek Dedicated Homeschoolers

Fifteen years ago, homeschooled graduates had a tough time getting into any college or university setting. Since the homeschooling movement was relatively new, admissions directors had no idea where to begin with homeschooled applicants, and most appeared hostile due to an uncomfortable lack of experience. Today, all of that has changed. Many colleges actively recruit homeschoolers, and information for the homeschooled applicant abounds on websites and admissions brochures. True, there are still some colleges that remain somewhat silent about homeschoolers, but it's rare to find an admissions board that will actually refuse them based on their educational background alone. It's important to remember that colleges aren't necessarily looking for the perfect student; they're trying to put together a diverse student body. And although many application procedures seem designed to make entrance difficult for homeschoolers, most admissions directors will judge a homeschooler on an even par with a traditionally-schooled student. If anything, a homeschooling background gives students additional visibility and causes college officers to take a second look at their applications.

According to Elisha Anderson, assistant director of admissions at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, homeschoolers have an advantage because they stand out from other applicants. "In our admissions process, there's a sheer number of kids applying with really strong credentials," Anderson told TOS. "We want to see how a student can differentiate himself from the pack, so we look for something that makes him stand out from the typical high-achieving applicant."

"Nationally, people are looking to see if homeschooling is just as good," Adam Carman told TOS. "They want to know, 'Can they do this? Will they succeed?' But I found myself at least as well prepared as my public-schooled counterparts. I don't say college is for everyone, but if you're a motivated student, you can get yourself up and do what needs to be done."

Do You Really Need a College Education?

To attend college or not to attend college? That seems to be the real question. "College has been the default button on our child-raising menu for too long," writes Cafi Cohen, author of *The Homeschoolers' College Admissions Handbook*. "It is almost a mantra in our society . . . We have reached the point where most families automatically push their children to attend college regardless of

their sons' and daughters' interests, talents, and occupational goals.”

Is a college education really necessary? ABC-TV's Peter Jennings and famous children's illustrator Tasha Tudor didn't think so. In fact, they both dropped out of high school! Author Ernest Hemingway, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, oil billionaire John D. Rockefeller, and actor Robert Redford all went directly into the career area of their choice after high school. And Samuel Clemens (better known as Mark Twain) once wrote, “Never let your schooling get in the way of your education.” Historical citizens, including 12 U.S. presidents, have proven that four years of continuing education may not be an automatic recipe to success.

Hundreds of jobs work off the “licensing” or “certification” method of education. Massage therapists, therapeutic riding instructors, daycare professionals, and healthcare professionals all fall into this category. Then there are professionals who work from the “experience” spectrum, like animal trainers, salespeople, office managers, and freelance writers. Most professions—photography, for instance—sit right on a figurative threshold, when the option to obtain a degree is available but not required. Still, your career choice may require continuing education; doctors, lawyers, veterinarians, psychologists, public school teachers, and scientists must all hold 4-6 year college degrees.

Perhaps the best view of college education is found in Ralph Waldo Emerson's reflection: “The things taught in schools and colleges are not an education, but the means of an education.” Alternatives to college include apprenticeship, volunteer work, self-directed learning, enlistment in various branches of the military, internships, and paid work. According to education expert Marty Nemko, the students who may want to sidestep a college education are “smart self-starters,” or motivated people who don't need a college degree to sell their talent. Nemko also counsels against going to college just to find out what you want to do in life. It's better to wait and pursue a direct course of study rather than select a major on a whim or because you did well in a class for one semester. “Dabbling” in various courses is like taking a road trip without having a destination in mind; it's possible, but not always practical. Unless you have unlimited amounts of time and money to spend, don't go to college until you know that being there will help you achieve your career goals.

If you do decide that college is in your future, don't be afraid! It's easy to be overwhelmed by the vast amounts of research, record keeping, and testing that supposedly “must” be done. In reality, applying for college is just like applying for a job; your goal is to prove that you will be a welcome addition to their team.

From Community College to Ivy League (And Everything In Between)

Students and parents often look for a specific answer to the following question: if a candidate presents A, B, and C, will he or she be admitted to college? Because so many issues factor into the selection process, the answer to that question is almost impossible to provide. However, the fact that there are an immense number of colleges and universities across the nation practically guarantees admission for any student with decent grades. The real question should not be “Will I be admitted to college?” but “Will I be admitted to the college of my choice?” To answer this question, we go to three schools that represent various levels of the college field: Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, one of the oldest universities in the United States (with a 2003 student body of 11,385); Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina (serving approximately 5,000 students); and Black Hawk College, an Illinois-based community college with over 11,000 students.

According to college records, over three-quarters of the students who apply for admission to Yale are

qualified to study there. In fact, about 300 students each year are so academically strong that their admission is almost guaranteed. But the rest of Yale's students are admitted because their detailed transcripts attest to a strong educational work ethic. At Yale, there are no cutoff scores of standardized tests. The median scores for admitted students generally fall in the low-to-mid 700s on the verbal and mathematical portions of the SAT, but successful candidates present a wide range of test results. And while there is no hard and fast rule, it's safe to say that the Yale admissions committee will often consider educational performance above test results. A very strong performance in a demanding college preparatory program may compensate for modest standardized test scores, but it is unlikely that high standardized test scores will persuade the admissions committee to disregard an undistinguished secondary-school record. The students who seek admission into Yale must be motivated, intellectually curious, and able to handle a broad range of challenging courses.

At Bob Jones University, homeschoolers always feel welcome because, as Admissions Director David Christ puts it, "There are no hoops to jump through." The university works to maintain a homeschooler-friendly atmosphere in all aspects, from admissions procedures to advertising. "Most homeschooling parents are looking for universities that are anxious to have their students," Christ told TOS. "They don't want to do a lot of fighting to open doors that should already be open for them." One of Bob Jones' specialties is the sample transcript that they sent to prospective students with homeschooling backgrounds. "Parents are often concerned about format, so we provide that for them," said Christ. "Our sample walks them through the creation of a transcript for our admissions office step by step." According to Christ, the body of students who were homeschooled is on the rise at Bob Jones, and the university continues to stay true to its philosophy, seeking to maintain "high academic standards, an emphasis on culture, and a practical Christian philosophy that is both orthodox and fervent in its evangelistic spirit."

In Illinois, applicants to Black Hawk College will find a variety of courses to fit their needs, as well as a fairly simple admissions process. Although GED and ACT scores provide a direct route into the college, students who have not obtained those scores may gain admission by taking the school's course placement test. The test, which covers basic reading, writing, and math skills, is known as the "ASSET" and is provided to community college applicants by the same organization that administers the ACT. There are many benefits to attending a community college, especially for homeschoolers. The ASSET often replaces otherwise mandatory SAT or ACT scores, and that placement test still qualifies if the student decides to transfer to a four-year college or university after a few years. Also, many students find living at home more affordable and convenient than moving out of state to attend school.

Sitting Out the SAT: Creative Alternatives to Traditional Requirements

If the college applicant with traditional schooling background is met with a barrage of requirements, then the homeschooler's application process must seem twice as overwhelming. For many students who have been homeschooled, preparing for college means facing thoughts of standardized testing that was not required by their schooling method. Requests for transcripts, reading lists, ACT or SAT I and II scores, and GED testing can make it seem like there's no end to the "technical" paperwork and records that need to be submitted. Then there's the "jump-through-the-hoops" phenomenon exhibited by colleges that require double or special testing for applicants with homeschooling backgrounds. Requests for additional testing can be expected from most of the Ivy League schools and many military institutions. College guidelines also vary from state to state. In Florida, homeschooling high school juniors and seniors get free college tuition at local community colleges. But in New York, transcripts from anything other than a traditional school are not recognized. In addition, many New York colleges have been known to exhibit "anti-homeschooling" bias in their admissions processes.

When dealing with colleges that require additional test scores from homeschoolers, it can be hard to find a reasonable way to meet their expectations. One homeschooler-friendly testing option is the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), a standardized testing method that is recognized by over 2,900 colleges and universities across the nation. The CLEP program, administered by the College Entrance Examination Board, offers standardized examinations in five main college-level subjects: Composition and Literature, Foreign Languages, History and Social Sciences, Science and Mathematics, and Business. There are 29 specific tests that are administered under these general categories, including English Composition, French Language, American Government, Biology, Principles of Accounting, and more. According to the College Board, “A college usually grants the same amount of credit to students earning satisfactory scores on the CLEP examination as it grants to students successfully completing the equivalent course.” While some colleges place a limit on the total amount of credit you can earn through CLEP exams, others may not allow CLEP scores to count as credit toward a degree at all. Says David Callihan, author, speaker, and CLEP prep classes teacher, “With the CLEP program, you could find your child testing out of a significant portion of an associates degree without even stepping on campus.” Many Christian colleges accept CLEPs toward their four-year degree programs as well. For homeschoolers who take the accelerated learning approach toward high school, CLEP tests provide a great way for students to earn double credit.

“It is becoming quite apparent that the material being taught in the first two years of college is ‘remedial high school,’” Callihan told TOS. “So why not teach it right the first time and then get the college credit too?”

Although CLEP scores may be accepted for credit at many colleges, it’s usually necessary for the student to provide results from a standardized test like the SAT or ACT. Some homeschoolers will opt for GED testing instead, but Callihan doesn’t recommend that method. “GED testing is a drop down in your educational status,” he told TOS. “Usually it’s reserved for people who quit high school or have bad grades. Even the federal government recognizes it as second level, since GED grads are not sought after for enlistment into the military. They’re called level two recruits, and homeschoolers just won the battle to be considered level one recruits when they enlist. So when I say I don’t recommend the GED, it’s not because I think it’s subservient, it’s because the system says it’s subservient.”

“If you’re homeschoolers, you have every reason to believe you’re providing a substantial education,” Callihan told TOS. “If the parents are responsible for a student’s education, the parents should be the ones to validate the education. Public schools across the country are asking for parental involvement and saying, ‘It doesn’t work without it!’” Homeschoolers are taking ultimate responsibility, Callihan believes, but they’re often labeled “unqualified” to give their children a diploma. Still, there are ways to document your student’s high school years to prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that their educational history is valid.

Getting Technical: Transcripts, Essays, and Other Paraphernalia

Most homeschooling parents recognize the need for a detailed transcript of high school work. Still, compiling four years of home education into an understandable record can be a somewhat daunting task, especially for parents who use the “Charlotte Mason” or “unit study” approach to schooling. “I think it frightens most homeschoolers because it’s an area that’s unknown,” said homeschooler Wanda Gibert. “Parents need to realize that what they’re teaching is valid and approved, and that it can be presented in an acceptable manner.” Gibert completed high school transcripts for three of her six children; her oldest daughter graduated with a four-year degree in special education, her oldest son is

completing an apprenticeship as an electrician, and her second daughter (a recent high school grad) is taking courses at a local community college. One of her favorite resources is *Creating Transcripts and Issuing Diplomas: What Every Parent Should Know*, by Inge Cannon. Cannon is the founder of Education Plus, a company devoted to helping parents base their homeschooling philosophy upon biblical principles. In her book she explains the reasons for creating a solid high school transcript.

“In a sense, a student’s high school transcript is like [a] tax return,” Cannon writes. “It summarizes and reports in a concise way the total educational profile of the student’s experience. Behind that transcript should stand a portfolio of work samples, bibliography of resources used, detailed test information, anecdotal records, recommendations from employers and directors of extracurricular activities, etc. This further documentation would then be available for any interview where it might become necessary.”

Formats for transcripts abound, but the basic information that is required remains the same, no matter what the design. A transcript must include the student’s identification: name, sex, birth date, and social security number. It should also list a current address and other contact information. It is also professional to provide school identification; the name, address, and phone number for your school should be provided somewhere on the document. The transcript must provide a general history of all subjects that your student studied, their grades earned, and your student’s GPA. Providing that information may seem difficult, but it’s really very simple. “Physical education can be logged as anything from biking to basketball,” writes homeschooling author Valerie Bendt. “I list cooking, sewing, or cleaning under Home Ec. If the child has done a special picture or project, I log it under Art or Projects. Remember, education does not end with school work.” Extracurricular activities like speech, debate, teaching music, etc., should also be included in your student’s transcript. So should volunteer hours and other community service. In reality, just about everything your student has done for the past four years should count for something . . . even caring for a pet or helping with the family car.

Wrapping It All Up: Advice from Current College Students

Adam Carman found applying to college fairly simple, since New York law requires that homeschoolers keep detailed attendance records, grades, and transcripts. “I know a lot of homeschoolers who think they need to take every test that was ever invented,” Carman told TOS, “but test scores alone won’t put the admissions office in your favor. I think that being able to write a decent essay is very important. The personal essay section of your application shows not only that you have an opinion, but that you can express yourself and get a point across.”

Rachel P., a sophomore at Patrick Henry College (PHC) in Virginia, believes that adjusting to college life is a stretch regardless of your educational background. “College isn’t boring, dull, or easy,” she says. “I do more work here than I’ve ever done in my life. But surviving is not impossible . . . at least, I don’t think it is!” What’s the key factor to making it through college? According to Rachel, it’s having “Extreme self-discipline.”

And if your student is concerned about adjusting to the structure and rules of college life, take the advice of this homeschool grad: “It’s just a matter of how much you’re willing to bend and what your home atmosphere was like growing up. Some colleges have rules that aren’t very different from ones you had when you were growing up. Others will have rules that seem like they came from way out in left field. It’s all a matter of perspective and background, but if you go into it all looking to learn, I’m sure you’ll have a great time and be well-educated by the experience.”

Biographical Information

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