TIME

The Radical New Ways Colleges Are Sizing Up Students

By Eliza Gray

April 7, 2016

Jesse Burke for TIME
Hannah Chapman used a video portfolio to show that she was more than “an ordinary 17-year-old, middle-class white girl”

Hannah Chapman is used to dealing with nerves. A competitive tennis player, the 17-year-old faced some of the toughest opponents in Maine on her way to winning a state title. But the weekend before her early-decision application was due on Nov. 1, her on-court calm was nowhere to be found. Hannah had wanted to go to Elon, a liberal-arts college in North Carolina, since the 10th grade. As the deadline approached, however, she couldn’t help but feel inadequate. Elon sifts through some 10,000 applications every year, and Hannah worried that nothing made hers stand out from the rest. Then she noticed that applicants could create a profile on a social-media platform called ZeeMee, which lets them use videos and images to show a side of themselves that might not come through in the typical mix of transcripts, essays and teacher recommendations. Feeling desperate, she decided to give it a try.

Using black pen on basic white paper, Hannah drew little cartoons to represent her interests–an old-fashioned trunk for her wanderlust, music notes for her love of French pop–and tied it together with her own narration. “My name is Hannah Chapman, and on paper, I seem like an ordinary 17-year-old, middle-class white girl from Maine,” she says in the voice-over. “But there is so much more to me than that.” It was rudimentary but clever. In just a minute, she showed that she was self-aware, creative and a little irreverent–far more than the sum of her average grades and test scores.

Hannah may not have realized it, but her handcrafted video displayed the exact characteristics that many colleges say they are now trying to find in prospective students. “Our admissions officers are looking for something that is authentic and imperfect, and somebody who is thinking differently,” says Amy Gutmann, president of the University of Pennsylvania. “When people game the system, they all sound the same. We are not looking for students who fit one particular mold. The current process really does not fuel that well.”

Plenty of other higher-education leaders say they share Gutmann’s view, and they’re now helping drive a major shift in the hypercompetitive, overstressed world of college admissions. They acknowledge some of the problems they helped create: too many kids burn out trying to come off as perfect rather than real, and a focus on hard metrics like AP classes and test scores means too many promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds are overlooked.

As a result, many schools have dropped or de-emphasized standardized tests, and a growing number say they are striving to find kids who are “authentic” rather than “ideal.” Last fall, a group of nearly 100 schools–including the entire Ivy League and many of the most selective state universities and private colleges in the U.S.–banded together to form the Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success. Their aim: to increase economic and racial diversity on campus, and to make the application process more relevant and less frenzied. (This is a good place to note that there are almost 3,000 degree-granting schools in the U.S., the vast majority of which accept more students than they reject.)

This month, the coalition expects to launch a set of free online tools designed to help lower-income students plan for college earlier and narrow the gap with their more privileged peers. And starting in the fall, students applying to a coalition school will have the option to use a proprietary application process that will encourage earlier preparation and creative materials like personal videos, digital portfolios, even comic strips. For many of these schools, it might eventually replace the Common Application, though individual members will tailor the new

application to their specific needs. “For us, it is about keeping up with the student population and the way they live their lives,” says Leigh Weisenburger, dean of admissions at Bates College, a coalition member. “They do it in technology.”

Coalition schools say their planning tools–which include a “virtual locker” that students can start using in ninth grade–will broaden applicant pools and cut down on the hysteria of the current admissions process, transforming it from an 18-month sprint into a saner four-year jog. And they believe their new application will help them better identify talented students who may not shine on a standard application.

The plan has no shortage of skeptics. As anyone who has applied to college in recent decades–or perhaps worse, guided a child through the process–can imagine, turning admissions into a four-year event is just as likely to add stress as to reduce it. Nor is it clear how the digital focus and longer timeline will benefit underprivileged kids. Many of the students the digital locker is designed to aid are juggling school on top of a job and family obligations. For them, building a digital portfolio could add yet another burden. And relying on technology creates its own problems: How can students without their own laptops compete against those who have video-editing software at home?

The great fear–which even some coalition supporters share–is that this new effort will only exacerbate the admissions frenzy. For kids who already fret over every other aspect of their application, why would a digital portfolio be any different? “What you don’t want is highly produced TED talks from privileged kids,” says Clayton Spencer, president of Bates, which is waiting until 2017 to adopt the new application. “All of these things are potential expanders of access, and all of them have to be regarded critically.”

The college-admission process as we know it today–overworked guidance counselors, well-paid consultants, stressed-out kids and freaked-out parents–began to take shape about 40 years ago. Faced with a drop in enrollment after the last of the baby boomers graduated, schools ramped up their outreach, expanding admissions staffs, visiting more high schools and producing slick marketing materials. In 1991, a Justice Department probe effectively ended the practice of fixed financial-aid awards, encouraging schools to compete to offer families the best price. In 1998, the Common Application, a standardized form accepted by more than 600 colleges, went online. Suddenly, kids could apply to as many as 20 schools with the click of a button.

America’s colleges were deluged with applications. At the most selective schools, there can be tens of thousands of applicants for every spot. This

year, Stanford received 43,997 applications and admitted just 4.7%. Seeking a leg up, parents who could afford it enrolled their children in costly test prep, hired private coaches to polish personal essays and pushed their kids to sign up for the most ambitious course load and hundreds of hours of volunteer work. For many, the point of high school has become getting into a top college. And some are beginning the process even earlier.

"When we started, we'd get the occasional eighth- or ninth-grader. Now it is almost every day that we get questions [like] 'What should my kid do in eighth grade to get into Harvard?'" says Andrew Belasco, CEO of the admissions consultancy College Transitions. "It is madness."

While these privileged achievers vie for a place at an elite school, their less-fortunate peers have been largely left behind. A study published in 2012 by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that more than half of high-achieving low-income students in the class of 2008–those with at least an A-minus average, SAT and ACT scores in the top 10% and family incomes below $41,472–did not apply to a single highly selective college. By this measure, there are as many as 18,000 low-income kids in America who could get into a top school but didn't apply to even one.

Members of the coalition think their new approach will help get more of those students through the door. "It's amazing to me how many underserved students don't understand when we are reviewing them it is going to reflect their whole four years," says James Nondorf, dean of admissions at the University of Chicago. The locker, he says, will allow "students to think of applying to college as something that isn't just 'Oh my God, what do I do' senior year, but building a record throughout high school where those accomplishments are fresh in their mind. When they try to apply, maybe then it will be less stressful."

There is evidence that a digital portfolio can benefit underresourced students. Goucher, a small private liberal-arts college near Baltimore that is not in the coalition, recently started allowing kids to submit a short video and two pieces of high school work instead of a traditional application. To avoid favoring kids with fancier technology, the school doesn't award points for production value. "We know that some students are writing their college essay on their phone," says Goucher's president, José Antonio Bowen. "When an advantaged kid with a computer is writing 60 drafts while a poor kid is writing it on a phone with his thumbs, that's not a fair fight. A video is a fairer fight."

Goucher says the change has worked. Of the 64 students who used the video application in 2014, 40% were African American, compared with

18% in the regular pool. These students also performed better: more video applicants earned a GPA above 3.0 in their first year than students who used the standard application.

But the ease of the Goucher model is that it allows videos instead of a regular application, not on top of it. “We talk about the enormous stress of the upper-middle-class student who is trying to get in a thousand volunteer hours on top of their schoolwork. We don’t talk about the stress of somebody who is just trying to get their recommendations while also taking care of their mom, brothers and sisters,” says Bowen. “The point of the video application is to ask for less pieces of paper.”

The hitch is that lots of paper will still be required by coalition schools, where the digital portfolio is expected to supplement the traditional package of essays, recommendations, scores and transcripts. To some admissions experts, this will only add to the already-heavy load. “It’s a horrible idea,” says Belasco, the consultant. “Instead of just crafting applications, we’ll now be crafting portfolios, and it will just be more hours to spend on applying.” It may be good for his business, he adds, “but it is bad for most students.”

While the digital locker is meant as an outreach tool, it is not yet clear how kids will know about it, especially in schools without counselors to help them put it together. “Who is going to review it?” asks Ryan Mitchell, a college counselor at Newark Charter School in Delaware. “College counselors are already overburdened. So many schools are underfunded when it comes to counseling.”

These questions have fueled criticism of the coalition’s motives. The group requires members to meet certain affordability benchmarks and have a 70% graduation rate over six years–something most U.S. schools can’t do. To critics like Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, the coalition is an attempt to create an exclusive pipeline to the next generation of students, especially as the nation becomes more diverse. “If you look at demographics, the number of white upper-middle-class kids who do well is declining. The number of Latino and Hispanic kids is rising. So the question of diversity is not only a moral question, it is a question of having enrollment,” says Botstein. “They think they can mask their naked self-interest through virtue. It allows them to recruit earlier. This is a market-cornering enterprise.”

One thing everyone can agree on is the need to restore sanity to the process. “You see the bleary eyes, and you wonder for these students: When is it going to stop?” says Mitchell, the counselor.

A recent effort to do that is “Turning the Tide,” a call-to-arms report from researchers at Harvard and the Education Conservancy that encourages kids to work or volunteer for a sustained period of time rather than take short service trips to exotic countries, to commit to a few extracurricular activities instead of dabbling in dozens and to understand that character is as important as achievement. “The college-admissions process is a very powerful messaging system,” says Richard Weissbourd, the report’s lead author. “I don’t think it changes until incentives change, until colleges start saying in a loud way, ‘This is what we value.'”

Dozens of schools have voiced support for the recommendations, though it will take far more to undo decades of conditioning. But at least colleges are moving in the right direction. The new buzzwords out of admissions offices are terms like genuine, caring, creative. And many college gatekeepers believe that this new array of digital applications will allow more of those qualities to come through.

“It works when it is all authentic,” says Diane Anci, dean of admissions at Kenyon College. Still, she understands why kids try to come off as something they’re not. “We’ve made it crazy enough that that is all they can do, but it is really impressive when kids can buck all of that and hold their own.”

It worked for Hannah Chapman. About a month after sending Elon her ZeeMee video, the school welcomed her to the class of 2020. She will start this fall.

This appears in the April 18, 2016 issue of TIME.