

Students

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Home-Schooled Students Rise in Supply and Demand

By PAULA WASLEY

For Katelin E. Dutill, high school began as soon as she woke up each day. During her senior year she would tackle her hardest courses first, while her 20-month-old sister was still asleep. That often meant taking a math or chemistry test and then turning to the teacher's manual to grade it, or logging on to her Advanced Placement macroeconomics course. Later she might read for her literature class while keeping one eye on her sister, or conduct Internet research for her paper on the historical accuracy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novels.

This fall Ms. Dutill, who has been home-schooled since kindergarten, is experiencing a classroom for the first time, as a freshman at Cornell University. She is one of thousands of home-schoolers entering colleges and universities around the country. The home-school movement, once considered the domain of religious fundamentalists and hemp-wearing hippies, is all grown up and going off to college.

While exact numbers are hard to come by, recent estimates by the U.S. Department of Education place the home-schooled population at more than one million, or about 2 percent of the school-age population. As recently as 20 years ago, home schooling was illegal in many states. Today its students are edging toward the mainstream — and are eyed by some colleges as a promising niche market.

Meet Us Halfway

As an admissions officer at Stanford University in the 1980s, Jon Reider began fielding inquiries from home-schooled students who, he says, seemed to have the "intellectual spark" the university was looking for, but who came without the transcripts and teachers' recommendations that admissions offices rely on. He advised those students to take steps to reassure admissions officers: Take lots of standardized tests. Get a letter of recommendation from someone not related to you. Try taking a class at a local community college.

"College admissions people are a little like insurance adjusters," says Mr. Reider, who is now a college counselor at a San Francisco high school. "We don't want to sell insurance to people who smoke four packs a day."

The suggestions soon became codified as Stanford's written policy for home-schooled applicants, earning the university the reputation as one of the first to welcome them. The policy, he says, sent a message to home-schooled students: "We take you seriously. Now meet us halfway."

Years later, just about every college takes home-schoolers seriously, and admissions offices everywhere report increasing numbers of applications from them. In 2000, 52 percent of colleges had written policies, like Stanford's, to evaluate home-schooled candidates, according to a study by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. By 2004, 85 percent did.

Most of those policies, specified on application forms, Web sites, and admissions brochures, are designed to get around the challenges of evaluating grades given by Mom and educational backgrounds as individual as the applicants. Many home-schooled students, like Ms. Dutill, follow accredited curricula furnished by a booming industry of home-school retailers. Other families design their own courses of study. Some students, who identify themselves as "unschoolers," direct their own learning, according to their individual interests. Translating years of independent study into something that resembles a high-school transcript can be tricky for the home-schooled applicant — and even more challenging for the admissions officer assessing it.

"In many cases their transcript is here, there, and everywhere," says Paul M. Cramer, vice president for enrollment at Elizabethtown College, in Pennsylvania. That's why the college "strongly encourages" all home-schooled applicants to go to the campus for interviews, he says.

One applicant's schooling entailed traveling the country with his family in a motor home, Mr. Cramer recalls. A stop at a Frank Lloyd Wright house became a lesson in architectural history; a detour through Ernest Hemingway's home, in Key West, Fla., prompted a discussion of American literature. "That kind of originality and enthusiasm about what they're learning is fun to hear," he says.

But sifting through homemade transcripts, extensive book lists, and portfolios can be unusually time-consuming for admissions officers. Eddie K. Tallent, director of admissions at George Mason University, recently received one application that contained a page of explanation for each class listed on the transcript. "That was a bit much," he says.

Without traditional points of comparison, like class ranking and grade-point averages, colleges tend to fall back on standardized-test scores. Many require that home-schoolers take two or more SAT 2 subject tests in addition to an SAT or ACT.

As the number of home-schoolers applying to college continues to grow, admissions offices have attempted to streamline the process. The University of Richmond, for example, has one admissions officer assigned to read all applications from home-schoolers. This year the Common Application, a format used by more than 300 colleges, added a supplement for home-schoolers, which both pleases and unsettles some home-school advocates.

"We're not fighting to even be considered anymore," says Howard Richman, executive director of the Pennsylvania Homeschoolers Accreditation Agency, one of seven organizations in the state that provides accredited diplomas to home-schooled graduates. On the other hand, he says, such standardization may cost home-schoolers some of the individuality that has set them apart.

In From the Fringe

Indeed, as their numbers have swelled, the college-application process for home-schoolers increasingly mirrors that of their more conventional counterparts. A host of home-schooling guides offers advice on compiling transcripts and highlighting the advantages of home schooling in application essays. So, too, do independent consultants, who offer the same sort of college counseling that a traditional high-school guidance counselor would.

Wendy J. Bush, an independent counselor in Maryland and home-school advocate who advises about 90 home-schooled seniors per year, organizes college fairs and financial-aid workshops, furnishes students with transcripts and letters of recommendation, and even holds home-school graduation ceremonies.

The Home School Legal Defense Association publishes a ranking of colleges with "home-school-friendly" admissions policies. In online discussion groups like [homeschool2college](#), parents swap stories about navigating the admissions process and bemoan the difficulty of representing a summer of barn building on a

high-school transcript.

Many colleges that once treated home-schoolers with suspicion now reach out to them as desirable applicants.

"Home schooling often really allows students to develop a passion," says Sabena Moretz, associate director of admissions at Richmond. "With a traditional high school, most of the time you don't see a kid who's gotten so excited with the history of Monticello or got themselves onto an archaeology dig."

Recognizing that sense of passion is what led Virginia Commonwealth University to create two engineering scholarships this year for home-schoolers, says Russell Jamison, dean of the engineering school. "We were looking at the kind of engineer that we needed to produce for the 21st century," he says, "where part of the skills are not technical, but how to collect information through guided inquiry."

It occurred to him that home-schoolers' inquisitive, self-directed learning style — an educational model that often gets lost in the highly structured "problem-set oriented" environment of traditional high schools, he says — was particularly well suited to engineering. The school holds an annual open house for home-schoolers to get them interested in both engineering and Virginia Commonwealth. (One thing Mr. Jamison has learned, he says, is that when you plan a home-schooling event, the whole family shows up. At this fall's open house, he included robot-building activities for elementary-school-age siblings.)

Social Smarts

The last hurdle in the admissions process for home-schooled students is persuading colleges that they have the social smarts to get along with their traditionally educated peers.

"There is an assumption that kids who are home-schooled are strange, that their idea of having a good time is sitting in a tree," says Mr. Reider, the college counselor.

In a 2004 study of college admissions officers' attitudes toward home-schooled applicants, Paul Jones, a vice president and a professor of educational administration at Georgia College & State University, and Gene Gloeckner, an associate professor of education at Colorado State University at Fort Collins, found that while the majority of respondents believed that home-schoolers would perform academically as well as their peers, if not better, 35 percent expressed skepticism that home-schoolers had the social skills to cope with college.

But, argue advocates of the movement, home-schoolers are hardly the hermits they are sometimes made out to be. Home-school bands, theater groups, sports teams, even proms are common now. Home-schooled students often study together in co-ops led by parents or the students themselves.

For an increasing number of home-schoolers, community college is the entry point to a four-year institution.

Julie Boiko, a sophomore at Stanford who was home-schooled, began taking classes at her local community college at age 13 to supplement her math and science studies. "You can't do chemistry in the kitchen," she says.

A self-described "science geek," Ms. Boiko says her classes at West Valley College, in California — including microbiology, anatomy, and calculus — gave her a head start on the immunology research she now conducts at Stanford. At first, she says, her mother had to keep reminding her to put her name on her midterms.

While the few experts who have tracked home-schoolers' academic and social performance in college have found little difference between their transition and that of their peers, the perception lingers that home-schoolers start college at a social disadvantage.

That's why Grant Mukai rarely tells classmates at Boston University that he was home-schooled from second grade through high school. "Normally I say I went to a private school," says the sophomore, adding that in many ways, the co-op he sometimes attended at a church basement was like a very small, very private school. While most of his friends there went on to small, religious colleges, Mr. Mukai chose Boston for its urban setting and strong communications program. "It was a little weird at first," he says of going to college, but in the end not that big a deal: "It's not that hard to learn to sit in a classroom."

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