

Inside The Admissions Game

Who holds the keys to elite schools like the University of Chicago? How do they choose? An exclusive look. By John McCormick

Do we really want Rebecca? Almost any college would offer a seat in its honors program to lure such a talented applicant. But this is the choosy University of Chicago, where the 12 members of the admissions committee can't even decide whether to let her through the door. With seven applicants competing for each of 1,011 slots in the class of 2003, Chicago clearly doesn't need Rebecca. Rick Bischoff, her advocate on the committee, argues that she has strong leadership skills. He recalls being so impressed when he first met the young woman that he muttered, "I sure hope she's smart." In fact, her transcript is very good. And yet Chicago has already rejected hundreds of applicants with better grades. Bischoff tosses on the cluttered conference table a Kelly-green folder that sums up Rebecca in 32 pages. "Look at the way her teachers write about her," he urges. "Plus, she doesn't like 'Dawson's Creek'."

Around the room, brows furrow. This is a zero-sum game: accepting Rebecca would mean curtains for yet another of the nation's most gifted high-school seniors. One committee member complains that the girl's answers to application questions don't echo the lofty academic ideals that Chicago projects in its literature. "Yes," a pro-Rebecca member fires back, "and don't you get suspicious when they do?" Bischoff, his arsenal nearly spent, launches what Chicago admissions counselors call "the don't-give-a-s--- argument." So what if Rebecca will get only C's in math-she, and not some higher-scoring robot, is the provocateur we want sitting in class. Dissenting voices crackle, but fall silent when Ted O'Neill speaks. O'Neill, 52, is a machinist's son who came to this work after years devoted to the study of Romantic poetry. As dean of admissions, he has spent a decade urging his staff to look past grades and test scores. Yes, other kids appear more deserving. "But we are the University of Chicago," O'Neill reminds his colleagues. "We can do what we damn well please, so long as we have good reasons." Moments later, Rebecca is admitted.

In an age when jurors scurry from murder trials to explain their verdicts on CNN, few deliberations remain secret. But what happens behind the door of the college-admissions office each year is still a dark mystery to 2.5 million applicants and their jittery retinues of parents, teachers and counselors. Over the past year, Chicago permitted NEWSWEEK to watch what goes on behind the wizard's curtain. The only condition: that we obscure the identities of kids like Rebecca, whose real name is, well, not Rebecca. This week Chicago's decisions on whom to accept for the fall of 1999 will land in mailboxes around the globe: big envelopes for those invited to the great Gothic campus built with John D. Rockefeller's millions-and small ones for those who'll be enrolling somewhere else.

The American tradition of "going East" to find the best colleges means Chicago will never have the cachet of the Ivies, with which it competes aggressively for students. But these days Chicago is hot. The number of applicants grew 25 percent this year alone. More remarkably, their average SAT scores leaped 20 points, to about 1370, with the biggest surge from the very top kids. Those

who get big envelopes can enter the owlish, arrogant place that refused the Queen of England an honorary law degree because she'd done no scholarly work to deserve it. Chicago prides itself on being a grind. As the school's own recruitment book dryly warns, "You know you're doing well when your GPA is higher than the number of hours you sleep a night."

The admissions cycle that ends this week formally began last April 1 when the first batch of high-school juniors visited campus. A year earlier, though, Chicago was already sending recruitment packets to 45,000 of the nation's top sophomores. By last summer, an explosion of visits to its campus-up 50 percent from 1997-signals Chicago's growing popularity. For O'Neill's harried staff, it's a bittersweet prospect. By instinct they want to share their school with every applicant who's qualified. But more great kids ultimately means... more small envelopes.

By late fall, applications for "early action" flood into the admissions office, a cozy warren of small rooms in twin-towered Harper Library. This autumn there are 1,238 "EA" applicants, 44 percent more than a year ago. Because of Chicago's narrow appeal to brainy kids, perhaps 80 percent of all its applicants could succeed here. Far fewer, of course, will ever be accepted. This buyer's market allows the admissions staff to consider a delectable question: if nearly every applicant is qualified, then who is most desirable? For Chicago, the answer is the high-end student who embraces complex ideas and ceaseless discussion, who reads "Anna Karenina" and can't wait to tell someone about it. "We tell people we're seeking rigor," O'Neill confides one brittle December day, walking through a sunlit stone quadrangle. "What we're really seeking is love."

With a Dec. 11 deadline to mail its early-action decisions fast approaching, the committee gathers in O'Neill's high-ceilinged office to make its toughest calls. Admissions counselor Jessica Marinaccio frames the first dilemma: "What do we do with a kid who's brilliant-in one area?" A second counselor, startled by the overly math-centric file of the boy we'll call David, marvels that he seems "differently cerebral." But a third, Adele Brumfield, looks concerned: David also doesn't communicate well. "Look at his essays," Brumfield murmurs. "If we take him, he won't be able to convey ideas to anyone but his buddies in the Math Club." The committee doesn't reject David, but votes to defer its decision until March.

The next case generates more heat. Kevin has flitted through almost every activity in his high school. Trouble already: serial joiners don't impress Chicago. Better to pour years of devotion into a few deep interests. In the words of Michael Behnke, a university vice president who oversees admissions, "The kid who touches every group has no impact. He won't be missed." O'Neill, meanwhile, has spotted something else: Kevin plays several sports. O'Neill observes that smart athletes manage time well, and find unorthodox ways to succeed. He recalls a recommendation written years ago by a high-school football coach: "This boy reads poetry and physics in the locker room. I don't have another one like him."

Kevin's case also broaches what Chicago calls "the grits

argument." Can this country boy succeed in a bigger setting? Chicago aggressively recruits small-town kids, often waiving their application fees, even though on entering, their academic skills can trail those of top private-school grads by two years. Why are they often desirable? Peter Chemery, an associate admissions director, explains that small-town kids tend to be well developed as individuals. Like big-city kids, they've had a wider range of experiences than sheltered suburbanites. By that measure, the truly disadvantaged student is the child of a soccer mom, shuttling from one scheduled activity to another. "This image of 'well- rounded' suburban students with long lists of extracurriculars is an utter fiction created by the

college-admissions industry," Chemery says.

After debating Kevin's future for 21 minutes, 11 members of the committee make a show of hands. The tally: five to admit, four to defer, one to deny, one unsure. O'Neill rules. Kevin is in.

He's one of 708 young people from the strong early-action pool who receive acceptance letters in December. Eighty-nine percent are from the top tenth of their classes, often in the nation's most competitive high schools. An optimistic guess: 45 percent of those accepted early by Chicago will enroll next fall. With its class one-third filled, O'Neill's staff now braces for a second, much bigger wave of applications that will wash in by Jan. 1.

To evaluate each applicant, Chicago counselors begin by composing little stories about them. Each youth's folder contains her application form, transcript and letters, along with a statistical sheet that profiles the student's high school: how hard do teachers grade, how many advanced-placement, or A.P., courses are offered. The entire file is first read by the admissions counselor who recruits in the student's region of the country. The counselor then writes perhaps 200 words suggesting whether this person belongs at Chicago.

The counselor also grades each applicant 1 to 5 for academics, A to E for activities, talents and character. The best 20 percent (often 1-A's) become "express" files that go straight to O'Neill for approval. Most files, though, go from the first reader to a second counselor, then to an associate director like Chemery. If the three of them can agree on how to classify an applicant, her file goes with others like it into one of 21 boxes that sort applicants into cohorts: the 2-B's in one box, the 3-minus-B-pluses in another. Before decision letters go out, O'Neill also gives many of the files a fourth look.

The most contentious or borderline cases go to meetings of the full admissions committee. These can be no less passionate than a debate between professor and student. "The purpose," O'Neill says, "is to make sure we have the applicant's story straight." The meetings also teach young counselors-the committee's average age is 35-how Chicago resolves vexing questions. Examples: Why is this girl's transcript so uneven? Is this kid so full of himself that our faculty-which itself brims with prima donnas-will complain that he can only spout his own dogmas? Do we care that she attempted a break-in at school if she was only trying to retrieve her books?

The troubling case of Justin hits three such chords. His grades

have ranged from F's to A's. He's had one scrape with the law. He now ranks near the top of his class, and his test scores are superb. Two of Chicago's counselors, put off by his unstable record and his self-absorbed essays, have urged rejection; one says there is "little evidence he cares about anyone but himself." And yet Justin has risen from the dead, his file resurrected from the "double deny" box by an associate dean who says the two counselors' notes haven't captured whatever drives Justin. O'Neill is intrigued. "First he failed, and now he's doing the best he can," he says. "What more can we ask?" But a disturbing comment from Ben Hernandez, a young counselor, silences the room: while Justin's essays acknowledge his earlier mistakes, at no point does he accept responsibility for them.

Justin's case is so confounding that committee members set it aside and turn to Roberto. His recommendations are strong, his test scores weak. Chicago does not segregate its minority applicants into pools where they compete only against each other. O'Neill does acknowledge that "if they're qualified, minorities have an easier time being declared desirable," because they bring fresh perspectives to the classroom. Often, though, the question is whether Chicago's rigor will engage an applicant or overwhelm him. The committee looks to its own minority members—two African-Americans, a Latino and a native African—for the answer. On average, minority students have lower standardized test scores than white students. But, says O'Neill, "later in life, they succeed. We help make things accessible for them."

O'Neill and Hernandez see Roberto as a strong candidate, a once purposeless youth who now shows great potential to be a leader. "We would hear his voice permeate this campus," Hernandez says. After a poor beginning, the boy's high-school grades are moving upward. But just as the committee appears ready to accept Roberto, counselor Kazi Joshua invokes the memory of Justin. "Why do you believe in transformation in this case," he pointedly asks, "and not the previous one?" Again, the group pauses.

When admissions officers at selective colleges don't know how to resolve these tough calls, they often turn to an applicant's essays. The student's words can seal his fate—a fact not lost on applicants who write one set of good responses and adapt them for as many colleges as they can. Chicago is famous for asking questions for which there can be no boilerplate answers. Example: given the probability that the federal tax code, nondairy creamer, Dennis Rodman and the art of mime all came from outer space, name something else that has extraterrestrial origins and defend your hypothesis. (One response: Barbie, who has seduced millions of women into fruitless attempts to mimic her alien shape.)

A less outlandish question asks why you want to attend Chicago. It is not cool to answer, as some applicants do, "I want to attend Columbia because..." or "I am very impressed by your engineering school," something Chicago doesn't have. The essays also allow applicants to explain the most formative moments in their lives. There is no right answer here, but there can be wrong ones. Counselors roll their eyes at sagas told in formulaic ways, as if lifted from books on how to get into college: "As the storm raged, the other climbers were nearing hypothermia as I led

them down the mountain in British Columbia..." Good essays show imagination and self-awareness. "I can be radically moved by an essay, usually because it draws together the other elements of the file," Chemery says. One of this year's best: a Latino applicant's essay on his love of classical music and books.

If essay answers are useful to counselors, standardized test scores often are not. Listen to committee debates, and it's clear that because scores tend to correlate with grades-both high or both low-many times the scores aren't even mentioned. The numbers often say less about the applicant than about the quality of school district, or the private-school tuition, that his parents have been able to afford.

With 12 days to finish its job, O'Neill's team still has 4,000 applicants hanging in the balance. Of this year's nearly 7,000 applicants, roughly 2,000 were accepted during the early-action phase, or have been chosen to receive acceptance letters that will be mailed in late March. An additional 1,000 applicants clearly won't make the cut. Admissions officers close in on the remaining candidates from above and below, moving toward the point where the last applicant is accepted and the next goes onto the waitlist. The crush of applications has backed up the system by six crucial days.

Chemery, Bischoff and Andre Phillips, the third associate director, begin to comb one last time through every box, even the double-denies. Occasionally they slide files from box to box, making sure they've arranged the whole field from most desirable to least. The system functions like artificial intelligence, learning more about parts of the pool as it lopes along.

The job of pinpointing how many people to accept falls to Bischoff. Ideally, Chicago wants to mail only as many acceptances as it takes to put those 1,011 freshman fannies in the seats next fall. The math is complex. Each cluster of applicants has a different probability of actually enrolling: Chicago will lose some 1-A kids to Harvard, but it will enroll a higher percentage of 2-B's, a group for whom the competition among colleges isn't as ruthless. Bischoff's magic number: Chicago will mail an additional 2,452 acceptances. Counting the early-action admits, the total will be 3,160. Teams of counselors will carefully check each decision letter to prevent dreadful mistakes.

As March dwindles, it's clear that the line between admit and waitlist will fall somewhere in the 3-plus-B-plus cluster. But how to differentiate among the 475 similar files in that group? The committee meets for a full day to discuss 29 randomly drawn files. The hope is to find some way of determining whom to accept and whom to waitlist. Once a border is established, it's relatively simple-if laborious-to accept virtually all students above that line and waitlist those below. To force decisiveness, O'Neill decrees that the committee can accept only half of these 29 applicants. Soon a pattern emerges. Applicants with great grades and accomplishments are voted onto the waitlist; those with some extra spark are accepted. A dutiful student at the very top of his class creates no special excitement. The next youth, an immigrant who's written a soul-stirring essay about his parents' lonely struggle to support their family, is a unanimous admit.

And those lingering cases? In the last hour of its last meeting, the committee settles them. David, the heavily mathcentric student, goes onto the waitlist. Roberto is denied admission; his first-semester grades were lackluster. Finally, the debate over Justin, the once troubled applicant who rose from the double-deny box, becomes the most prolonged of any this year. The admissions committee weighs his strong first-semester grades and a second letter of recommendation from his high-school counselor, and votes to admit him. Justin's resurrection is complete. Among his supporters is Hernandez, who before had opposed him. Says Hernandez: "He's turned it around."

Last Friday—three days behind schedule—all the big and small envelopes go into the mail. For the first time, Bischoff runs the whole class through a computer program. Only then does Chicago learn that it has accepted 1,529 men and 1,631 women. Their average SAT score is about 1420. Their ethnicity, something that many applicants don't divulge, still isn't known in the aggregate. Chicago prides itself on using no gender, racial, geographic or other quotas in deciding whom to accept. "We're not 'building a class,' creating this ideal little world with so many of these and so many of those," O'Neill says. "We accept the best, and hope to get as many as we can."

Those who are accepted must commit to Chicago by May 1 or go elsewhere. During this five-week window, O'Neill's phone will ring many times, with parents complaining that their children, too, should have been accepted. O'Neill will scour each file, often thinking to himself, "What's wrong with this kid? He looks good!" It frustrates him to have to say no. At the same time, he is the steward of a finite resource: an education at one of the world's finest universities. O'Neill will handle these callers—some angry, some desperate—like a man who understands how much anxiety the admissions game can create. Next year, his daughter Libby will be applying to colleges.

Tips From the Pros at Chicago

1 Grades matter, but so does the rigor of your courses. It's best to take several years of foreign languages and four years of math.

2 Trajectory is important, too: try to finish high school stronger than you started.

3 A long list of extracurriculars can mark you as a serial joiner. Better to make a few school groups the best they can be.

4 Get a letter from a teacher who can put you in a larger context. Example: of all the seniors in our school, this is the one we value most for his volunteer work.

5 Your parents shouldn't be helping you write your essays. Their role is to read an early draft and judge if it captures you accurately or not.

6 An admissions officer has only about 15 minutes to read your file. Penmanship still counts.

7 If you're waitlisted, persistence can make the difference.
Write back and tell them you're still very interested.

8 Remember, you're trying to get into the best college for you,
not just the best college.

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