

# MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER

**The majority of kids are chasing the minority of schools. A broader search could find a better fit**

By Linda Kulman

**W**hen Taylor Corbett, 18, of Lake Forest Park, Wash., got turned down by his first choice—Bowdoin College, in Brunswick, Maine—the Corbett family was on Day 4 of a weeklong power outage. Bowdoin, with its mix of serious but friendly students, seemed the quintessential college to Corbett, and he couldn't envision himself anywhere else. With no TV, computer, or video games to distract him, he was left sitting in the dark with his anxieties.

In a less literal sense, Corbett's plight is familiar to many high school stu-

dents searching for a college. The fear is that they won't get into their dream school, and life as they know it will be over. That's not all bad. "A little anxiety is OK," acknowledges Marybeth Kravets, a college counselor at Deerfield High School in Deerfield, Ill. "They're sending out an application to people they don't know."

Among the nation's 2,533 four-year schools, however, hyperselectivity is the exception: On average, the college acceptance rate is above 70 percent. "That statistic alone should suggest that there's a spot at a four-year institution for anyone who wants one," says David Hawkins, public policy director

at the National Association for College Admission Counseling. Each May, on its website ([nacacnet.org](http://nacacnet.org)), NACAC lists schools that still have spots in that fall's freshman class. This year, more than 300 colleges responded.

Even so, getting in can seem daunting. Part of the difficulty, says Arlene Ingram, a guidance counselor at Cape Henry Collegiate School in Virginia Beach, Va., is that "the majority of the kids want the minority of colleges." Martha O'Connell, executive director of Colleges That Change Lives Inc., a nonprofit agency, agrees: "There are still many colleges being underenrolled just because people flock to name-brand colleges." Adds Maria Furtado, admissions director at Clark University in Massachusetts: "We're quick to judge that if we know it, it must be good."

In fact, statistics don't necessarily bear out that assumption. An annual survey by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University finds that more selective institutions don't guarantee a more satisfying collegiate experience. Rather, what students gain from attending college has less to do with where they go than it does with



Look for a school where you'll be "happy as a clam." (Quad at SUNY-Environmental Science and Forestry)

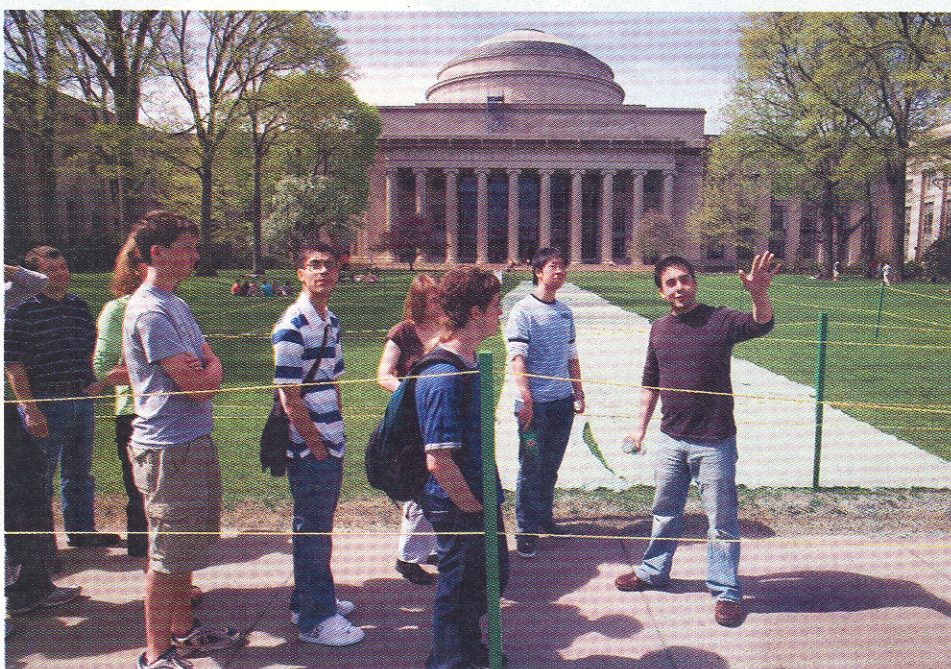
such factors as student-teacher involvement and the activities they do while they're there. Choosing a school based on its pedigree was easier when there were fewer students in the mix. But the number of graduating high school seniors is expected to peak at 3.3 million in 2009. In 1974, the last time the country had roughly the same number of young people finishing high school, only about half pursued a college degree. Now more than two thirds do so, and enrollment at four-year institutions is projected to grow by about 165,000 a year through 2015. The more students worry about getting in, the more colleges they apply to, which, in turn, can lower everyone's odds at any given school. Forty years ago, 43 percent of incoming freshmen applied to only one college. Now more than half of all students apply to at least four schools. Corbett applied to 12. "I wanted options," he says.

So what's the answer? A better list, says Marlyn McGrath Lewis, admissions director at Harvard. Says Walter Robinson, admissions director at the University of California-Berkeley: "At the end of the day, it's like buying a pair of shoes or a suit; it has to fit you."

Introspection is the first step in finding that fit. College counselors advise that you take time to identify who you are and what characteristics you're looking for. Do you like being an observer or a participant? Are you religious? Do you want to stay close to home or go somewhere new? Do you see yourself at a liberal arts college, or do you prefer the comparative anonymity of a major research university? Do student-teacher ratios matter? Do you plan to join a fraternity or sorority? What's your budget? "Then, only then, do you begin to identify the individual colleges that meet those criteria," says Mary Lee Hoganson, NACAC's current president.

**Reaching for more.** Pick schools on a continuum in terms of reach. "The trick is for the safe schools to have all the same characteristics as the reach schools," she says. "Often what students do is put all their research into their reach schools and never consider the others."

Liz Freeman, 17, took such advice to heart. "I knew I was interested in sci-



ence," she says. But "I don't know if I want premed or research, so I looked at schools that have good science programs in general." Hoping to learn Hebrew, she dropped Amherst when she learned that it offers only a self-study program rather than a formal language class.

As simplistic as it might sound, visiting schools is crucial. George Kuh, director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, offers a list of questions to ask. How often do students talk with faculty members out-

**What makes MIT unique?**  
Well, the Great Dome on Building 10 (and its pranks).

Freeman got a thumbs up from her No. 1 school, Washington University in

St. Louis, where she applied early decision. Others have made their own luck. Taylor Corbett realized that he'd had blinders on about Bowdoin, and regrouped: He chose Occidental College in Los Angeles, a school that reminded him of Bowdoin's nurturing environment. Jack Blackburn, the dean of admission at the University of Virginia, says that although students can transfer in after a year, march down the lawn, and get [their] degree with us, "it happens infrequently." More often, he says, "they go to another school where they're happy as a clam. They get involved in sports, the college newspaper, the glee club, and a girlfriend or boyfriend."

Paul Spurduto's experience is in line with that. The Atlanta native visited the University of Virginia when he was 13, tagging along on his older brother's college visit, and decided he belonged there. Five years later, as a high school senior, he felt just as firmly about it. But things didn't work out. Wait-listed and ultimately turned down, he switched gears. Now, he's a sophomore in the honors program at the University of Georgia. Keeping an open mind makes all the difference, he says. Georgia, he says, has "infinite possibilities with thousands of activities. I'm having a great time." So can you. ●

## Take time to identify who you are before you start to pick individual colleges.

side the classroom? How often do students study abroad (story, Page 80)? For Judith MacKenzie, a Seattle-based educational consultant, the most important question to answer is, "Can I see myself here? If you're a night owl," she says, "does the library close at midnight, or is it open all night?" When Freeman went to visit Drew University in Madison, N.J., she asked about the Hillel Center for Jewish life on campus. "They couldn't remember the guy's name, so they were going to give me his number," Freeman says. "Instead, they ended up giving me the hotline number for something like the Holocaust Remembrance Club. I high-tailed it out of there."