

NAVIGATING THE PROCESS OF ADMISSIONS

As the number of applications to U-M has soared in the last few years, entrance to the University has become increasingly competitive.

By Anna Clark, '03

The cycle begins in late summer for the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. Applications trickle in soon after August 1, when students can begin to apply. The trickle becomes a deluge as early as September 1, and shortly after that, OUA is processing hundreds of applications each day. By the November 1 early action deadline, counselors as well as seasonally employed readers each review applications over a six- or seven-day work week.

"As the total number of applications goes up each year, the stress level for processing them, reviewing them, and getting a response out also goes up," says Jim Vanhecke, associate director of admissions. "It's a big part of what we do in this office."

A victim of its own sterling reputation, the University of Michigan has seen tremendous growth in the number of student applications over the past 10 years. In 2001, Michigan received slightly more than 25,000 applications. Applications for the 2012-13 academic year, in contrast, numbered 42,535—a new record. By the first week of June, OUA had selected 15,523 of those for admission. Typically, fewer than half of admitted students will enroll.

Ted Spencer, U-M's associate vice provost and executive director of the OUA, cites "the tremendous increase in the number of applications" as the biggest change in admissions over the last few years. The numbers compare with a rising

tide of applications at other elite public universities: the University of California, Berkeley, received a record-setting 61,661 applications for the 2012-13 academic year, a 16.5 percent increase over the previous year. The University of Virginia saw a more than 17 percent increase in applications (from 23,971 for the 2011 fall term to 28,200).

"Statistically, the admissions process has become more competitive for applicants," says Kelly Cox, associate director of the OUA. "Unfortunately, that means there are many outstanding students capable of being successful at Michigan who aren't offered admission each year."

Because the number of applications is growing at a rapid pace, the University has the luxury of accepting a talented group of the Leaders and Best. OUA evaluates applicants in three academic categories: high school grade point average, high school curriculum, and SAT and ACT scores. (See the sidebar on page 33 for a statistical snapshot of incoming freshmen.)

Questions about test scores and grade point averages are common when Cox hears from prospective students who are evaluating whether Michigan is right for them. Others are interested in particular degree programs—both their availability and their status. Admissions counselors work hard to help students understand that admission decisions are not just a numbers game.

"We try to emphasize that when we're evaluating an applicant's transcript, we're looking at more than just their school-reported GPA," Cox says. OUA is also interested in the kind of curriculum the student experienced—the rigor of the classes and whether or not the student participated in advanced or dual enrollment classes, if they were available. The curriculum should be suited for the college to which the student is applying; math and science are particularly emphasized in the College of Engineering, for example, while English and foreign language classes are important for applicants to the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

More than just succeeding in classes, applicants are also involved in community service, clubs, student government, orchestras, theater, and many other activities; many have started their own charities or businesses. This experience beyond the classroom helps paint the picture of the whole person.

"It used to be evident who you would take, but defining the highest-quality student has changed," says Vanhecke. "No longer can you rely just on test

U-M alumni often assume admittance is based on parameters established when they applied decades ago. But their sons and daughters are facing a much more selective process.

A Holistic Review . . .

Each application to the Office of Undergraduate Admissions undergoes three reviews, with readers rating the applicant on secondary school academic performance, educational environment, and counselor and teacher recommendations:

- **THE FIRST REVIEW:** An application reader. This review is considered a blind read in that the reader does not share his or her recommendation for admissions status with the next reviewer so that it will not influence that assessment.
- **THE SECOND REVIEW:** A territory counselor. Each counselor is responsible for applications from a specific geographic region; this allows each counselor to develop a deeper knowledge of schools and school systems in that region.
- **THE THIRD REVIEW:** Someone who holds a position of leadership in the OUA. This reviewer reads the application package, reviews the recommendations of the first two readers, and most often validates the admissions decision. If there are special concerns or characteristics of the applicant, the third reviewer may elect to send the package to a committee made up of faculty and staff representing the particular academic unit.

Reviewers make an admissions decision recommendation based on the composite evaluation rating and comments. In the end, a final decision is influenced by a number of factors, each carefully weighed and considered to make the best possible decision for the applicant and the University.

. . . and Early Action

The process above takes place earlier for students applying for early action. The early action deadline—November 1—means that students will receive an admission decision by December 23. Otherwise, students can apply by February 1 and await a decision that may come anytime from late January through early April.

Adding an early action option has had a huge impact on the OUA. "The November 1 deadline was a game changer," says Jim Vanhecke, associate director of admissions, citing that more than half of all applications are for early action. "The increase alone creates a great deal of work with the review, but the quality of student is not at all compromised. EA students are as qualified as, or stronger, than those who apply for regular decision. This boosts the overall competitive nature of admissions."

Could You Pass This Test?

If you think applying to U-M is tough now, consider the students who applied to the University of Michigan Department of Medicine and Surgery in 1875. Following are a few questions from the September 30 "Examination of Candidates for Admission":

- Give the capitals of the Middle States?
- Name the States of the Union which lie on the Atlantic coast, giving them in order from north to south?
- What are the principal cities of Great Britain?
- What are the chief mountain ranges of Europe?
- If a straight line were drawn from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., what States and Territories would it pass through in order?
- If one grain of ptyaline will change two thousand grains of starch to sugar, how much (in pounds, etc., troy) would be so changed by a scruple of ptyaline?
- Supposing a man's heart to beat seventy-one times every minute, how many times will it beat in a leap year?
- What is the Cabinet of the President of the United States; and of what officers is it composed?
- What are winds and how are they produced?

SOURCE: U-M BENTLEY HISTORICAL LIBRARY

scores, grades, and classes. You must rely on these other factors. Without taking all things into account, we have the abundance of so many applicants who are so strong, you have to factor in all these other pieces of information." He adds that U-M alumni often assume admittance is based on parameters established when they applied decades ago. But their sons and daughters are facing a much more selective process.

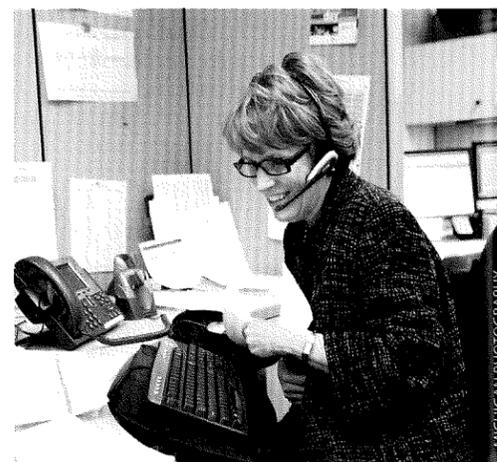
DESPITE THE STUNNING RISE in applications, OUA persists in personalized recruitment practices designed to cultivate quality in each class. Spencer says the office "purchases over 200,000 student prospect names and we contact them in a variety of ways: mailings, emails, alumni contacts, and through student, staff, faculty, and also call-outs from President (Mary Sue) Coleman herself." Representatives also visit more than 400 high schools in Michigan and about 300 out-of-state schools (along with some international visits). And each year, the office hosts 14 receptions across Michigan; five receptions in the major metropolitan areas of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.; and several Campus Day sessions in Ann Arbor. Alumni also make major contributions by hosting about 40 receptions across the country, through either local alumni clubs or the Alumni Student Recruitment program.

The ASR program is particularly effective in convincing admitted students to enroll in the University. Building on the understanding that the most persuasive argument to attend Michigan comes from those who have been students themselves, Vanhecke says 1,400 alumni across the nation and world (48 states, 33 countries) volunteer to reach out to admitted prospective students in their communities. Local alumni, who reach 93

percent of admitted students, serve by answering questions and supporting the applicant through the decision-making process. Some alumni volunteers "adopt" a particular high school, serving as a go-to resource for local students reflecting on the next great step in their education. They might take the student and his or her family out for a meal in addition to hosting a gathering for admitted students so they can connect with one another.

Vanhecke says that while this activity helps ensure a higher yield rate—the number of admitted students who enroll—he'd like to see it go even higher. Currently, U-M's yield rate is around 40 percent (the national average is 41 percent). "Yield trends tend to be lower at the publics than at privates. This is true also of UVA, Berkeley, Chapel Hill."

He adds that the far reach of the ASR program doesn't contradict U-M's mission as a public university. Recruiters are sent to every county in the state and host receptions in "the Upper Peninsula, Niles, Benton Harbor. ... We want quality students from all corners of Michigan." While students have come to Ann Arbor from all 50 states and 114 different countries (just under 5 percent



President Mary Sue Coleman makes admissions calls to prospective students.

MICHIGAN PHOTOGRAPHY



Ted Spencer, associate vice provost and executive director of admissions

of all Michigan freshmen are international students), a majority of students that U-M enrolls are in-state: 66 percent of the 2011 freshman class. According to Spencer, "Most of our high school visits and receptions are planned to increase both the number of applications and enrollment of in-state students. At the same time, current demographics indicate the number of Michigan high school graduates is decreasing—while both the number and quality of applications from out-of-state and international students is increasing. And so, striking the right balance is one of our greatest challenges in the future."

IT HAS BEEN NEARLY 10 YEARS since the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision that limited the University's ability to explicitly account for the value of racial diversity in admissions. Proposal 2, a ballot initiative approved by Michigan voters in 2006, further restricted the University by prohibiting discrimination and preferential treatment based on race, ethnicity, sex, or national origin in public education. (A panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit overturned Proposition 2 in 2011, but it remains in effect while it is under appeal.)

The educational value of having a campus that includes a broad swath of society has not diminished, however, and OUA's application review process has been overhauled to meet the need in a new way. According to Spencer, the office has adapted by creating a review process that includes no fewer than two independent evaluations of every application.

The 2011 freshman class, which had an average high school grade point average of 3.8, was composed of 25 percent racial minorities, including African

2012 Freshman Class Profile

42,535

APPLICATIONS

15,523

ADMITTED

6,449

ENROLLED

AVERAGE HIGH SCHOOL GPA

3.8

MIDDLE 50TH PERCENTILE OF THE ADMITTED CLASS:

ACT COMPOSITE OF

29-33

SAT TOTAL OF

1990-2230

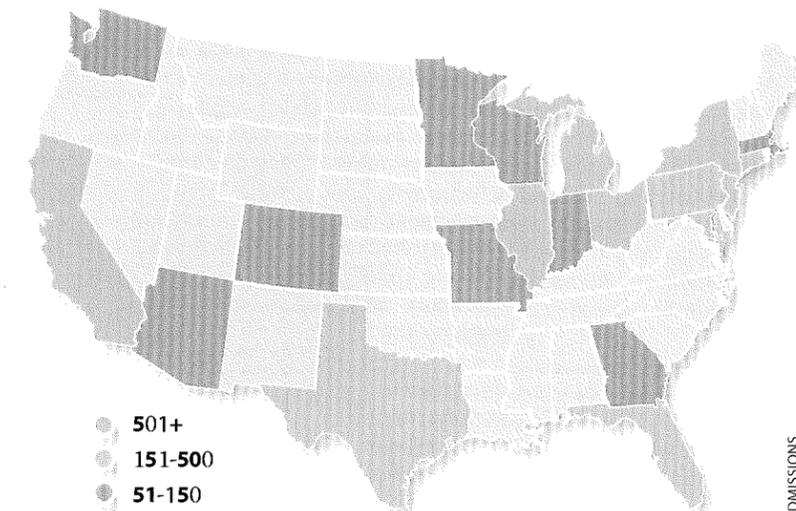
AP AND/OR IB CREDIT WAS GRANTED TO MORE THAN

3,000

NEW FRESHMEN

Where Students Come From

Students come from 50 states and 114 countries, and 66 percent of undergraduates are Michigan residents.



Other Locations for U-M Undergraduates

- International—1,644
- Washington, D.C.—166
- Puerto Rico—56
- Hawaii—35
- Alaska—27
- Guam—4

SOURCE: OFFICE OF UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS

Not Your Parents' Application

The Office of Undergraduate Admissions has been evaluating applications online for several years, says Kelly Cox, associate director of the OUA. "And we're now at the point where the vast majority of applications, transcripts, standardized test scores, and recommendations are submitted electronically." In fact, 95 percent of undergraduate applications are submitted online, according to Ted Spencer, U-M's associate vice provost and executive director of the OUA. The remaining 5 percent are submitted the old-fashioned way—on paper. While the OUA still accepts paper applications, it encourages electronic applications.

Part of the enormous rise in the number of applicants to U-M can be attributed to its adoption of the Common Application, now in its second year of use at Michigan. More than 400 colleges accept the free, online application.

Review and evaluation is also done electronically, resulting in a nearly paperless process. The admissions office considers this technology evolution an ongoing development. Spencer notes that "this generation of students are 'digital natives,' and what that means is that we will have to deliver our message through the media that they are most likely to use." Besides engaging more deeply with the usual slate of social media platforms, this plan includes Google ads and target marketing.

One challenge of the technology is how it changes expectations. Prospective students, says Cox, can learn a great deal about Michigan and its programs before they ever step on campus or speak to a counselor.

"Because of the easy access to information, and being accustomed to fast transactions online, there can be an expectation of a quick turnaround for an admissions decision," Cox says. "Our admissions process consists of a holistic evaluation, with each application receiving multiple reviews, and decisions released at different intervals. Other universities might have a less-involved process that allows them to post a decision within 48 hours of receiving an application. So it's a distinction we have to be sure they're aware of."

American, Hispanic American, Native American, and Asian American.

However, underrepresented minority freshmen were 10.5 percent of the 2011 incoming class, which was a slight decrease from the previous year. (Nationwide, the 2011 incoming class was the second to be admitted under a new demographic classification system from the federal government. So it's difficult to compare current data to those in the years before 2010.)

Increased interest from international students is also a national trend. Data from the Institute of International Education show a 4 percent rise in the number of international students studying in the U.S. in the 2010-11 academic year, following several years of flat or declining growth attributed to concerns about U.S. immigration policies following the September 11 terrorist attacks. Vanhecke says that the number of applicants to U-M from Asia has increased "three or four times in the last few years," and he's starting to see more applicants from South America.

At the start of the last academic year, Spencer described the incoming class as distinctive and diverse in every way—a tribute not only to the large pool of highly qualified applicants, but also the rigorous evaluation process in place in the admissions office. "They are unique in academic achievement and point of view, in service and engagement with their communities, and in demonstrated talents and leadership," Spencer said. "We are confident they will both flourish at the University and contribute substantively to our teaching and learning environment." M

Anna Clark, '03, is a writer living in Detroit. Her work has appeared in The Guardian, Grantland, and The American Prospect. She edits the website Isak (www.isak.typepad.com).



Visit umalumni.com/videos, and search for "admissions" to hear more about applications to U-M, including whether alumni could get in if they applied today and whether children of alumni children receive special consideration.