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Students go the extra mile for college acceptance

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Jun. 5--This summer, Mini Reddy, 17, will guide tours at the Health Museum and follow doctors and medical students around the Texas Medical Center.

The internships do not pay, but the aspiring doctor is banking on the experience helping when she applies to the highly selective Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., this fall.

"I'm trying to do everything I can," said Reddy, a senior-to-be at The Woodlands High School. Northwestern, which accepts about 30 percent of its applicants, "can pick whoever they want. So I'm looking for every advantage."

To get an edge in the increasingly competitive admissions race, teenagers across Texas and the country are flocking to math and science camps, visiting faraway places as missionaries and taking courses on Ivy League campuses this summer.

Attending some programs can cost thousands of dollars, and many parents view them as worthwhile investments. But some admissions experts said elite colleges and universities do not give much weight to expensive programs and activities, and a job mowing lawns can look just as good on an application.

"We look for initiative," said Mark Scheid, an assistant to the president and the acting admissions director at Rice University. "So if you work for your father, that doesn't get the interest of our (application) readers as much as someone from New York who rode a bus to Cheyenne to learn about being a cowboy."

The top factors in the admissions process continue to be grades in college preparatory classes, standardized admission tests, grade point average, class rank and application essay, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, or NACAC.

Private colleges, meanwhile, assign a higher value to the "tip" factors, such as recommendations and work and extracurricular activities, the association found.

Still, many parents feel the pressure to send their gifted children to an expensive summer camp.

The anxiety over getting into the right college comes at a time of rising tuition and

surging enrollments.

About 50 percent more students attend college now than 30 years ago, which means more students are jockeying for limited seats at elite institutions.

Jazzing things up

The competition has increased demand for summer programs.

These days, high school students can attend a six-week engineering and science program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or a 16-day camp at the University of California, Berkeley that teaches them about the college selection and application process.

They also can travel to Costa Rica, among other places, to immerse themselves in Spanish and help locals build a community center.

The Web site for The Woodlands High's counseling office provides a link to a private service that helps students find summer programs that "can broaden your horizons and jazz up your college applications."

Sheredian Vickers, a counselor at The Woodlands High, said she reminds students that academic credentials trump everything in the admissions process. But she encourages them to pursue their interests through internships or camps during the summer.

"Colleges are still looking at students whose activities demonstrate a passion for something," she said.

Close to home OK

Julie Rollins, a college counselor at Episcopal High School in Bellaire, said she tells students that colleges do not give extra credit for expensive summer programs because that would be unfair to applicants who can't afford them. Students also can volunteer close to home rather than exotic places such as Costa Rica, she said.

"There is not one thing that wows colleges, but you need to do something, whether it's flipping burgers or attending a college program," Rollins said. "You can't spend the summer sleeping in late and going to the beach."

Whatever students choose to do, colleges want to see how the activity shaped them, said Beverly Henry Wheeler, a Texas-based recruiter for the University of Tulsa and president of the NACAC.

"Don't just do it to pad your resume," Wheeler said, repeating the advice she gives prospective students. "We don't want just a mission trip. We want to know how it changed you. What weaknesses did you find? And how can we, as a university, help

you?"

Wheeler estimated that about a quarter of the students she sees hold down a summer job. Those who do work identified "save for college" as the primary reason for earning a paycheck, according to a recent Junior Achievement Interprise poll.

Many teens, of course, remain focused on the bottom line of college admissions.

Fernando Chavez, who will be a senior at the Barbara Jordan High School for Careers, will participate in academic and leadership programs this summer at Rice and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the two schools at the top of his wish list.

"I have to do everything I can now," said Chavez, one of seven teens participating in Rice's new summer school for high school students.

The program, which started Friday, allows high school students to take one class with Rice students for college credit. Although the high school students' participation does not guarantee admission, Chavez said he hopes that the program boosts him into the university's freshman class for 2007.

"It's an opportunity to go to Rice, tour the campus, take a class and meet professors," Chavez said. "That's why I want to go."

Reddy, meanwhile, said she hopes her summer plans will grab the attention of Northwestern and other schools by showing her interest in medicine. She also intends to visit some universities and meet with admissions officials.

"It's all I can do," she said.

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