

## Colleges Offer Applicants New Ways to Get an Early Answer

The Chronicle of High Education

By: Eric Hoover

Each day brings a flood of paper. On a Tuesday afternoon another wave of documents, high-school transcripts, test-score reports, and letters of recommendation has hit Drexel University's application-processing center. Near the door, eight employees open the mail, code the contents, and then feed each page into scanners. Around the corner, nearly two dozen workers type away at computers, assembling the disparate pieces of each student's application into a single digital file, which the admissions-staff members will soon read. In the cubicles hang yellow signs that say, "You are appreciated," a clue that the work here is as tedious as it is relentless. The operation runs in two shifts, from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. On a busy week, the staff might process 500 documents in an hour.

The wheels of Drexel's admissions process did not always spin so fast. A decade ago, the private research university had a lower profile and a fraction of the applicants. Then came a new strategic plan to increase the number of undergraduates by nearly a third by 2012, while also raising the academic profile of incoming classes and maintaining the student body's racial and ethnic diversity. So far, it's working.

Joan McDonald, senior vice president for enrollment management at Drexel U., believes applying to college should be easier. Drexel's enrollment-management office has grown into a large, clockwork division that runs an aggressive recruitment campaign. Its centerpiece is the Drexel VIP Application, which the university sends not to a select number of very important students, but to each and every one in its vast inquiry pool. The tactic speaks to several truths in higher education: That the college application has evolved and the traditional admissions calendar changed. That institutional growth and institutional survival often become synonymous. That many colleges, lacking a surplus of qualified applicants, will continue to develop creative ways of attracting more students.

Moreover, Drexel's VIP application, built to speed up and simplify the application process prompts an important question: How easy should it be to apply to college? Very, says Joan McDonald, at least at institutions like Drexel. Two floors up from the application-processing room, Ms. McDonald, senior vice president for enrollment management, has studied the sharp rise in Drexel's applications. In 2006 the university received nearly 19,000 freshman applications; last year it received more than 31,000. She attributes much of that increase to the VIP application, which Drexel started using three years ago. "Application demand is fuel for a university," Ms. McDonald says. "The more you have, the more you can shape the size, the quality, and the amount of institutional aid you can spend."

'All in the Presentation' Drexel's new admissions strategy works like this: Each year, the university buys the names of hundreds of thousands of high-school students who have scored within a particular range on standardized tests (between 1000-1400 on the SAT, for instance). Ms. McDonald sends each of those students an introductory letter asking if they would like to learn more about Drexel. The names of those who say yes go into the university's inquiry pool, which also includes students who first contact Drexel. All of them receive follow-up communications from the university. And in September of their senior year, they receive the VIP application. A type of "fast application," Drexel's version comes with students' names and addresses already filled in. "Apply today," reads the first page, which lists three advantages of doing so: expedited consideration for scholarships; a waiver for the \$75 application fee, which the

university waives anyway for online applications; and "no long essay," as Drexel requires only a brief personal statement. Students are urged to return the application (or apply online) by December 1, three months before the university's stated March 1 deadline. Drexel then follows up, urging each applicant to send the rest of the required materials, transcripts, test scores, recommendation letters, and the personal statement. The admissions office then reviews completed applications.

Drexel, which has a rolling admissions program, typically evaluates students in three weeks. So far the VIP program has done what Ms. McDonald hoped it would. Last year Drexel sent VIP applications to 175,000 students and received about 31,000 filled out. The university offered admission to about 68 percent of the applicants and enrolled a class of about 2,400. Colleges do not meet enrollment goals in a vacuum, and the reasons for Drexel's application surge go beyond marketing and recruitment strategies. Other explanations include the university's improved financial health, new buildings, the recent acquisition of a medical school, enhanced academic offerings, and expanded learning communities. In a tough economy, Drexel's co-operative education program, in which students get paying jobs linked to for-credit courses, is especially attractive. Still, enrollment officials here say the VIP application has delivered. Last year about half of Drexel's applicants used it to apply (many others applied through the Common Application). The VIP, Ms. McDonald says, has helped Drexel attract more students from out of state. Moreover, it has prompted more applicants to apply much sooner than in the past. The application seems to strike a chord with students. "It's all in the presentation," Ms. McDonald says. "It's saying, 'You fit our profile and we want you.' It eases anxiety."

Outside Drexel, some observers are not so sure. "It's a powerful marketing technique," says Terry Ward, director of college counseling at the Winchendon School, near Boston. But telling students to hurry up and apply, he argues, complicates the process and leads to confusion about deadlines. "I understand that Drexel might want to move up," he says, "but this is an instance of raising anxiety unduly." Casey Turner, Drexel's assistant vice president for recruitment, believes that the application benefits students and the university alike, however. Many admitted applicants, she says, have told the university that the personalized application made them feel wanted, even cool. "Whether they apply or not," she says, "if filling out the VIP application convinces them to get to know Drexel better, isn't that what's supposed to happen?"

But as more colleges use similar strategies, the power of such an application may well fade, a prospect that enrollment officials here have considered. "If that happens," says David E. Chezem, assistant vice president for operations in the office of enrollment management, "we would have to ask, 'What's the next big thing?'"