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True story: A senior at a New York City high school stole Bowdoin College's catalog from the guidance office last fall so that none of her classmates would be tempted to apply there. "I had a fantasy that someone really talented in singing would see the view book and take my spot," she says. Another true story: A Miami teenager surfed the Federal Election Commission Web site to find out whether any admissions officers she'd be trying to impress had made political donations. Upon discovering that the Colby College interviewer gave money to the Republican Party, "I muted my leftist views," says the future government major. And then there's this from Katherine Cohen, a New York college consultant who charges up to \$29,000 to help students select a suitable college and get in. She is booked for a year, with a waiting list, and some of her clients fly

2,000 miles to keep their appointments. Yet even she was surprised last year when a parent brought in a student who had recently finished seventh grade. Theft. Political posturing. Guidance that costs almost as much as a year in the Ivy League. Is this what it takes to get into college today? Anyone who has heard the horror stories of standout students turned down everywhere - and of whole class-fuls of valedictorians rejected by elite schools - can be forgiven for thinking their own good grades might require some extra measures. The high anxiety, all too common among college bound teenagers, can be blamed in part on the fact that so many kids are determined to go to "brand name" schools. "The quality of the application pool is so strong that we could easily have filled a very impressive freshman class just with students who didn't quite make the grade," says Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. Last year Penn received more than 19,000 applications for just 2,350 spaces. More than 80 percent of the valedictorians who applied to Harvard last fall didn't make the cut.

Don't be a joiner; do what you love

Diana Strong of Lake Geneva, Wis., wrote from the heart in her essay about how practicing the piano had helped her develop discipline and confidence. Asked on her applications about community service, she described how she had raised \$1,600 for a missionary effort through her church by putting on two solo recitals. Her extracurricular activities included the school's jazz group, wind ensemble, and the orchestra for musicals. Strong's passion for music, along with her fine academic record, made her irresistible to Northwestern,

Marquette, Tufts, and the University of Chicago where she starts this fall. It used to be that colleges wanted well-rounded students. Now, faced with growing piles of applications padded with indiscriminate club memberships, most selective colleges aim toward a well-rounded freshman class instead. "The embodiment at age 17 of a Renaissance person is difficult to find," says David Gould, admissions dean at Brandeis. "We realized we could accomplish the same thing with lots of different people."

The take-home message? Show a commitment to one or two of your burning interests-don't simply build a resume that ticks off every club in school. What impresses the folks who read applications is proof that an activity is a theme of your life. Recently, counselor Cohen urged one boy, a TV-sports addict, to get off the couch and get involved. He started writing sports column for the high school paper, coaching basketball in a poor neighborhood, and interning at an all-sports television channel. Cohen bets he'll have several offers next year.