PAPER CUT

The U-M picks its freshman class.

by Debbie Merion

The challenge: read three students' undergraduate applications and then, with clear reasoning, describe which kid you'd pick to proudly pull on a maize-and-blue University of Michigan T-shirt. Each application is at least twenty pages long and includes three revealing and possibly controversial essays. The students are a low-income African American girl from the Midwest who works twenty hours a week as a Kroger bagger; a privileged white boy from the East Coast whose grandfather was his role model; and a Chinese American girl in Hawaii who came to the United States against her will five years ago. This is not a game: these are real 2003 applications, part of a packet that U-M admissions officials use to train high school guidance counselors—and, in this case, a journalist—in how they made 21,000 undergraduate application decisions last year.

Until recently, getting into the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LS&A) was an exercise in number crunching. High school grades, test scores, and other factors were ranked on a work sheet and yielded a "selection index." Grades were the biggest contributor, but under the affirmative action system then in use, being a member of an underrepresented racial or ethnic minority group was worth an extra twenty points.

That all changed in June 2003, when the Supreme Court ruled against the U-M in *Gratz* v. *Bollinger.* Filed by a conservative group on behalf of a white woman, the lawsuit argued that LS&A's affirmative action system was itself illegal racial discrimination. The Court agreed. However, in a second case, *Grutter* v. *Bollinger,* the justices upheld a different admissions system used by the U-M Law School.

So in a matter of months, LS&A developed new admissions procedures similar to the Law School's. The application now asks students for more information, including three essays totaling 1,000 words. At the admissions office, points went out in favor of a "holistic" review process, in which all characteristics are considered flexibly in the context of the student's entire file.

The U-M receives more than 20,000 undergrad applications a year. Associate admissions director Sally Lindsley estimates that her staff spend more than an hour on every one before the decision-making process even begins.

To read all those files, the office used sixteen part-time employees, almost all of them retired high school teachers or administrators. Under the old system, readers were given just half a day of training; this year's hires spent a full week reviewing dozens of real applications from the previous year. Called "norming," the process was designed to produce consistent decisions. Senior admissions management first "normed" themselves by discussing the strengths and failings of students in the applications until their ratings were reasonably consistent. They then led counselors and readers in the process, which is now repeated each fall.

In 1998, when asked how important student essays were in admission decisions, the U-M gave them the next-to-lowest rating—"considered." In 2005, when asked the same question, the U-M said essays were "important." But it said recommendations, standardized test scores, talent/ability, character / personal qualities, state residency, and minority status were *also* "important"—and it rated students' secondary school records as "very important."

Nonetheless, most students take the essays very seriously. One student who was admitted last year says that he thought about each question for a week before writing the essays. Another says he wrote quickly but kept revising for a month. Yet another says he got up in the middle of the night to answer a question about how he would contribute to a diverse campus. "I'm not usually into writing," he remembers, "but I felt like I had to write about how the cornfields in my hometown symbolized walls to me . . . walls keeping out diversity."

He was perfectly sincere, but he'd also solved a riddle that troubles many applicants: what to say about diversity when you *don't* belong to an underrepresented minority. Two Community High School students I spoke with—one a white male, the other an Asian female—admitted struggling over the diversity essay, because they knew that white males and Asians were already well represented at the U-M.

In their cases, the struggles were evidently successful: both were admitted. So

PHOTOS J. ADRIAN WYLIE

Last year alone, associate admissions director Chris Lucier reviewed more than 3,000 applications.

how do those 1,000 words affect an applicant's chances?

continued

From her U-M application, seventeen-year-old "Anne" looks like a good bet in a race against the Energizer bunny. She has a 3.5 grade point average in the eleventh grade at a private school; plays point guard on the basketball team; holds office in the African American, step dancing, and Italian clubs at her school; and works half time at Kroger. After school, while her mother works one of two jobs, Anne takes care of a younger, disabled sibling.

As I scan the seventy-five pieces of biographical data presented in nine-point type, my eyes quickly glaze over. The U-M's "applicant profile" reminds me of the dense sheets of important but coded information that Realtors create for houses they're trying to sell. I know, of course, that higher is better in important numbers like GPA and test scores, but I'm not sure how low they can go and still be acceptable. So I focus instead on familiar territory—words—and start to read the essays, Anne's handwritten application, and teacher and counselor recommendations.

Apparently I've stumbled across a not uncommon technique. Ted Spencer, the U-M's undergraduate admissions director, says he, too, occasionally leaves the numbers for the end. "I build a story without knowing any of the data points," he says. "So I don't know if the test score is 1500 or 15. I don't know if their GPA is 2.5 or a four-point. But what I know is that, as I read this—all this subjective information—I have an idea about this student. And I only go at the end of that and look at, well, what are the grades?" Nine times out of ten, Spencer says, there will be a strong correlation between the student's grades and test scores and the rest of the information in the application.

Anne's diversity essay begins, "I am a unique individual with many wonderful qualities and skills to bring to your campus. My background offers diversity in every aspect, and my culture adds to the melting pot of the people here. I am an African American woman with strong opinions and views on many different subjects."

What were those many wonderful qualities? I wonder. What were her strong opinions on many different subjects? Her essay never explains.

Associate director Chris Lucier agrees about Anne's essays. "They don't do anything for me. They don't stand out," he says. "I think they're adequately written, but there is nothing that really flows from them."

The diversity question, Lucier admits, "causes the most angst." His favorite response "was from a young man from rural Ohio, who has worked on his grandparents' egg farm since he was in eighth grade. . . . He talks about his summer job as an egg picker, and he talks about what an egg picker does and all that—and the ending is that, you know, 'I don't think you have too many egg pickers at the University of Michigan!' And you know, he was right!"

U-M officials are a little jittery about providing such examples, though, for fear of creating a formula. They don't want future applicants to assume that, in Ted Spencer's words, "I need to be an egg picker [to be admitted] next year."

Applicants do "try to psych out that essay," says Julie Peterson, the U-M's associate vice-president for media relations and public affairs. " 'What do they mean by "diversity"? Do they really want me to talk about minorities? And I'm not a minority, so I'm not really sure how I can answer this question.'

"First of all, we don't have to use the essay as a replacement for a question about race," Peterson points out. "We ask students for their race or ethnicity right on the application, because the Court decision allows us to do that. And second of all, we define diversity broadly. So for us, diversity could be someone who taught sign language to deaf students—or somebody who sees the cornfields as walls. Students shouldn't hear the word *diversity* and think that that is somehow only talking about race and ethnicity."

Chris Lucier's analysis of the rest of Anne's qualifications reminds me of the guy on Ed Sullivan's show who used to keep dozens of plates spinning on poles: Lucier touches one part of the application and then rushes to touch another part, cross-checking back and forth, evaluating, balancing, reacting. Lucier needs to move fast, and with precision. Last year alone he reviewed 3,000 applications.

Thanks to her mom's two jobs, financial aid, and her own part-time work at Kroger, Anne was able to attend what Lucier calls "a fairly good parochial school." He bases that judgment on the school's median SAT scores (990–1210), the number of advanced placement and honors classes offered (nine, ten), the percentage of students who go on to four-year colleges (99), and the colleges they attend ("some great universities such as MIT, NYU, and Yale").

Anne's grades aren't a problem: "She has a 3.5 [out of 4.0] GPA at a pretty good school. [The U-M recalculates all grade point averages, omitting nonacademic subjects and ninth-grade grades.] Her math [SAT score] is a 460, so there's some concern here." But then he looks at her math grades and sees all As and Bs. "Okay!" he says. "So in the classroom she does pretty well in math, but she doesn't test well.

"I do notice that she had a D-plus and a C in physics honors last year. That's of some concern. . . . I look at chemistry, and she had an A and a B. I look at biology; she had an A and an A-minus. So what happened in physics? Don't know. Might not have time to actually dig into that. Maybe the counselor will address it for us; maybe they won't. That's the importance sometimes of counselor input." If not for those poor physics grades, he calculates mentally, "she'd probably have closer to a 3.8."

He notes her extracurriculars and the colleges her siblings are attending (they're all in good schools: Northwestern, Ohio State, the U-M). "Now," Lucier asks, "do you think she could be successful at the University of Michigan? Not at a 4.0. . . . Can this student graduate with a 2.8 to 3.0 at the University of Michigan?"

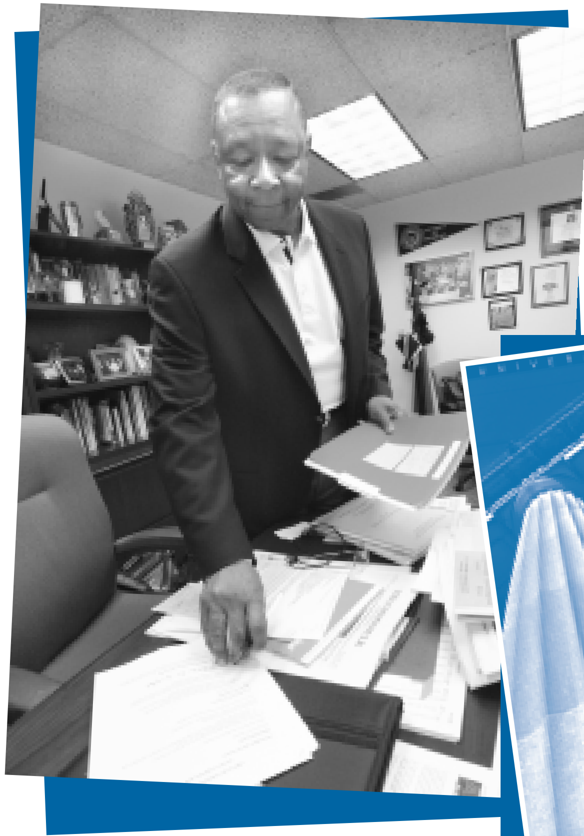
"Is that how you make the decision?" I ask.

"Absolutely. That's the first question always, because that is what defines a qualified candidate from an unqualified candidate. We do not admit any unqualified candidates, no matter their race, their ethnicity, their background."

Lucier and I are talking in a conference room at the Student Activities Building. In the U-M's real world of application reviews, Anne's application might be sitting on a reader's dining table with a coffee-cup stain circling her GPA. Each reader takes home sixty applications each week, spending approximately twenty minutes on each. When the application is not living with a reader, it lives in the basement of the Student Activities Building, safely double locked in a file cabinet surrounded by an eight-foot chain-link fence and guarded by stuffed monkeys who hang outside—as if hoping, like the students, to get in.

The reader, chosen at random, scribbles comments on a yellow Freshman Application Rating Sheet and gives an application one of fifteen ratings—from HA+, for "high admit plus," down through D–, for "deny minus." If an application falls anywhere between those extremes, a full-time admissions counselor who is familiar with the schools in the student's area reads the application independently and adds his or her own rating—without knowing the first reader's response. The application then goes to a senior admissions staff member such as Chris Lucier, who resolves any disagreements between the readers and selects the final rating. In the rare case in which the staff person can't decide, the application goes to a committee that includes faculty members from the school the student is applying to.

I still haven't answered Lucier's question about whether "Anne" can succeed at Michigan. "I think she can," I say, but without a great deal of conviction. I'm new at this, and not sure I want to vote without talking about the other two first.



Admissions director Ted Spencer sometimes bypasses a student's grades and test scores when he first reads an application. When he goes back to check, Spencer says, nine times out of ten there's a strong correlation between the scores and the rest of the information.

The second student, "Mason," is the white boy from the East Coast. He's written a very poignant essay about his grandfather, whom he calls Papa:

> Papa has been one of my most significant influences in my life. He was a selfless individual. I can think of countless examples where he put the needs of others before his own, but the one I cherish most occurred during a family vacation to Seattle. Unfortunately, I became ill the night we were planning to see a Seattle Mariners' game. Papa, who had been looking forward to the game for weeks, didn't think twice about giving up his ticket to stay with me. I think about this often when I miss outings with friends to deliver Meals on Wheels. . . .

A lump forms in my throat after I read Mason's essays. This, I feel sure, is a good thing for Mason. I check the one-page sheet of "reading tips" that was included with the applications:

> Does the essay tell you something about the student beyond the transcript? What did you learn? What qualities or talents does the student reveal? Do you hear the student's voice? Do you get a sense of the student as a person? Have they done an effective job of telling their story? Are the grammar, spelling, and punctuation correct?

Mason's school, in Washington, D.C., sends 99 percent of its graduates to four-year colleges, including some excellent ones like Georgetown, MIT, Yale, and Penn. It has higher average SATs than Anne's school

does, and more AP classes—nineteen. Lucier counts them and seems impressed.

Mason's GPA, 3.3, is lower than Anne's. Lucier begins to compare Mason's scores with the fiftieth percentile of U-M student scores: "He's lower than in our median band, but he goes to a pretty good high school, so that's something to take into consideration. His highest SAT is a 1270, which is in the U of M's median band."

He thinks out loud, trying to decide what he thinks about Mason's classes: "Given the richness of the curriculum that is available to him, I'm not sure he has challenged it as much as the first applicant has." But then he tallies Mason's AP and honors classes and reconsiders. "Okay, he's working hard. Now he's a child of privilege. He goes to a private school. Do you hold that against him? He goes to a great school, and he's got a good SAT. . . . I take a look at the extracurriculars, and I find that he's in the band, he plays several instruments, he's in sports, National Honor Society. He's a well-rounded kid."

In one of his essays, Mason writes about being adopted and how that gave him mixed feelings about abortion: "Abortion is such a controversial and divisive issue in this country and it is one that I grapple with constantly. I respect the rights of women and I do believe they should have the right to choose but I have trouble with the ease and prevalence of abortion in our society."

"I think he's honest," Lucier says after reading this. "He does do a little better job at giving us insight into how he thinks. . . . He's a seventeen-year-old male who's saying, 'I'm adopted, and I can understand both sides, and I don't know where I fall.' That's pretty fair, I think.

"Now, I'm not asking you for your political views, but if he had said, 'I strongly oppose abortion [Lucier punctuates this by pounding the table with every word],' and you support abortion, you have to take yourself out of your personal identification as much as you can and say, 'Is that student reflecting what he believes in?'

"Is that student as good to have in a classroom as someone who vehemently supports abortion? Absolutely, because what colleges are is a safe—well, we hope with the University of Michigan—is a safe time that you can have these discussions . . . where students can broaden their views or strengthen things they already believe in."

"A lot of our time is working to try and discuss these things and mitigate them. Can you mitigate completely who you are when you go through these files? Absolutely not. That's why we send them through more than one review."

English lecturer Caroline Eisner trains admissions staff members on what to look for in essays. When she asked them what they thought went into a good essay, she says, many emphasized "originality, creativity, and risk taking. On the other end we got academic writing skills—grammar, mechanics."

How far can a student go in being a risk taker before the essay becomes a deal breaker? One U-M freshman I spoke with wrote his essay on how he "got in trouble for drinking." Another student, who was admitted, wrote about how she handled a slight on a class trip, running along the beach until she was exhausted.

Dick Tobin, the college counselor at Greenhills School, warns it's possible to go too far: "If alarm bells go off in an adult, that's probably worth paying attention to. In some ways you don't know how an essay will play at the other end. In *The Gatekeepers,* by Jacques Steinberg, in which a reporter was given access to Wesleyan admissions for a year, a girl confessed that she had laced brownies with pot and wrote about what she had learned. They didn't take her because they thought there was a drug risk."

The third student, "Victoria," is also impressive. Her counselor writes, "She did well on the national AP test, attaining 'qualified' status. What makes her achievement more remarkable is that she moved to Hawaii from Hong Kong just four years ago. She mastered these demanding essays in her second language, English!"

Her school is not as good as Anne's or Mason's—Lucier describes it as a "private but not overly rigorous high school." He notes its average SAT (999), the number of honors courses offered (11), and the percentage of students who attend four-year colleges (80).

Diversity worked in her favor, though: "She goes to school in Honolulu. We don't get many students from Hawaii. That would be taken into consideration." How much consideration, I wonder? "We have no guidelines," Lucier answers.

She had a GPA of 3.4 through eleventh grade, but she applied late in the process, so her first-quarter grades in twelfth grade were also included—"which were not good." She has four Cs. Admittedly, she was taking three AP classes plus advanced physics: "She is challenging herself," Lucier says. Then he comes across her ACT scores and stops. "She has an 11 subscore in English—the top is 36—and a 490 in verbal [SAT]. I have significant concerns about her English proficiency, given the fact that she got a C and B in eleventh grade and so far as a senior she has a C in English."

Her ship is going down. Will her essay or the recommendations float it back up to the top? Lucier can't remember any essay that was so good that it changed his mind and took a student from a low to a high rating. "But," he asks rhetorically, "can an essay make a difference? Absolutely!"

Victoria's essay on what she would bring to a diverse campus begins, "With my positive attitude and willingness to work hard and learn, I believe that I could make a difference at the University of Michigan." Someone underlined "work hard and learn" on my copy. But Lucier isn't impressed: "I see sometimes students write, 'I'm a hard worker.' Well, we often tell students, 'Tell us something we don't know—if you've gotten great grades and you've taken good courses and you've done extracurriculars, I've probably figured out already that you're a hard worker, and you're not telling me something different from the other twenty-three thousand students who have also applied to Michigan and have also been hard workers.' "

Victoria continues, unwittingly revealing her language problem:

> As a bilingual student, I know a language barrier can really be a stumble rock in learning. There, after going through all the struggles of adopting English from Chinese in the matter of three years, I'm ready to reach out to those who are really to break their language barrier and learn. For instance, as I spent my junior year summer at UCLA summer school, I helped several students from Hong Kong Chinese University to prepare for finals by making a small study group and translating some difficult materials into Cantonese. And I am proudly to say that, with my help and their effort in working hard, they all pass their final exam.

"She's trying to give me some light into her background," says Lucier, "something obviously important to her—her transition to the U.S.—so you know a little more about her. But her writing is not engaging. It's a good story, but it's not that grabbing." He touches his heart.

How important are grammatical errors? "Although you think you're trying to read for overall content, you can never get away in writing from the fact that structure, grammar, and spelling are important," says Lucier. "A student who submits an essay with a lot of errors, particularly in the age of spell checkers—it's, like, how hard did this student really work on this essay?"

Applicants' timing can affect their chances, too. The U-M has "rolling" admissions, making decisions continuously from September through mid-April—and admissions standards can vary slightly from week to week. A committee called the Enrollment Working Group meets periodically to discuss how deep to reach into the next pool of applicants.

Last year the U-M admitted 62 percent of its first-time, first-year applicants, and 45 percent of those accepted actually enrolled. The tricky part is that students' likelihood to attend varies with their GPAs, their test scores, and whether they come from out of state. The U-M tracks these statistics as "yield rates" and takes them into account when deciding how far down the rating scale to go in any given batch of applicants. The highest of the fifteen ratings is high-admit-plus, but the university might, for example, admit down to the second-highest score (high admit) or even the third highest (high-admit-minus) at any point. Wait-listed students' applications continue to be evaluated throughout the cycle, so the sooner applicants dive into the pool, the better their chances of eventually landing at the U-M.

So who got in? (Michigan Marching Band drum roll, please.) Anne got the colorful nine-by-twelve envelope with a color photograph of Angell Hall on the cover, informing her that she was accepted. Both Mason and Victoria received the plain, slightly dingy business-size envelope that goes to students who are wait-listed or denied.

I understood why Victoria didn't make it. With her developing English skills, it's hard to imagine her being a successful student at the U-M. As for Mason, in another year he might have gotten in, and maybe even Victoria, says Chris Lucier. "It's always based on the total applicant pool."

The U-M's quest for diversity worked in Anne's favor, as it did for Victoria. "We take note of your race when we're looking at admissions," says Peterson. "So we might select a student who looks interesting to us in part because they're a racial minority." African American enrollment dropped sharply in 2004, the first class selected under the new system, mainly be-

Stuffed monkeys guard the locked cage where applications are stored. Last year, the U-M admitted 62 percent of its first-time, first-year applicants, and of those, 45 percent actually enrolled.

PHOTO J. ADRIAN WYLIE

cause fewer black students applied. After intensified outreach efforts, applications bounced back this year, and African American students make up just over 7 percent of this fall's incoming class.

As on the applications, the numbers don't tell the whole story. Last year's class was bigger than expected, because the yield rate improved—that is, more applicants accepted the U-M's offers of admission. As a school, says Julie Peterson, "we're hot." During the peak season, from Thanksgiving through the February 1 deadline, incoming applications fill as many as three brown duffel-size mailbags a day, in addition to those coming through on-line. Associate admissions director Sally Lindsley estimates that admissions staff spend more than an hour on every one—mostly creating the applicant profile and recalculating the GPA—before it's ever seen by a reader.

Even when things are busiest, Chris Lucier says, the readers never skip the essays. Ted Spencer calls them an opportunity for students to write "the stories they want to tell about themselves." And when I got the senior U-M admissions directors to talk about memorable essays they'd read, some varied stories emerged. One student analyzed different styles of tennis shoes, comparing them to different colleges; another described teaching fellow students to produce a sign-language play for a nearby school of the deaf. There was a boy who always wore yellow to distinguish himself from his twin brother, who hated yellow, and another who offered his red hair as his contribution to diversity at the U-M. One girl had lived in eighteen towns and saw her mother as her role model and her variety of hometowns as one of her strengths; another girl, who was class president, talked about how she became a leader.

Many of the most memorable anecdotes described colors or objects. That's consistent with a tip in Michael James Mason's *How to Write a Winning College Application Essay*: "Give your audience pictures that say who and what you are."

Of course, it's hard to know how much weight to give a single piece of advice in a single book: according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* story on admission essays, Mason's is just one of 202 such guides available on amazon.com. But it's perhaps telling that the *Journal* article featured a girl who wrote on her college application that if she were a shoe, it would be pink, with a very pointy toe, a flared heel, straps, and a diamond buckle.

Can a memorable essay like that tip the scales for an applicant? Because the U-M decides "holistically," we'll never know for sure. But a colorful essay that reveals a student's best qualities can, at least, paint a strong picture in the reader's mind. ■