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## Colleges Rise as They Reject

*Schools Invite More Applications, Then Use Denials to Boost Coveted Rankings*

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*Jane Brown, the college's vice president of enrollment, says it sends personalized letters to nearly 200,000 high schoolers. Photo by Dominick Reuter for The Wall Street Journal*

In the past six years, Northeastern University has vaulted 42 spots in the powerful U.S. News & World Report college rankings. And not merely because it added programs, hired superstar faculty or built fancy facilities.

The private school in Boston also has made an all-out effort to increase the number of applicants for admission, dispatching its 30-person recruiting staff across the country and sending hundreds of thousands of personalized letters and emails to high-school students. It persuaded more than 44,000 students to apply for one of the 2,800 spots in its fall 2012 freshman class—up from about 30,000 in 2007—a move that boosted the school's selectivity, illustrating a growing trend in college marketing.

Schools nationwide are intensifying efforts to amass ever-larger pools of applicants to improve geographic diversity and attract higher-caliber students and wealthier families. Armed

with granular data about high-school seniors, they are making frequent, personal appeals, visiting more campuses and making it easier and less expensive to apply. The possible payoffs range from improved institutional reputations and higher alumni-giving rates to more revenues. Being more selective is a benefit, too, though it determines just 15% of the U.S. News ranking, a fraction of which is determined by sheer application volume.

Schools are in effect benefiting from courting more students, many of whom they will eventually reject. For students and families, this means that getting into college won't be getting easier anytime soon.

Demographics suggest one factor driving the schools' approach: As applications tail off from children of baby boomers, fewer potential students are in the pipeline. For the 2013-14 school year, 3.2 million U.S. high-school students are projected to graduate, a 4.5% decline from the peak in 2007-08, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Northeastern began broadening its outreach nearly a decade ago as people moved away from New

England. It is cutting back on visits to local high schools—urging students to visit campus instead—while paying more attention to the Southwest, Southeast and West. Northeastern's recruiters are hitting 1,350 high schools this year, up 30% in five years.

The University of Michigan, also working to counter a drop in the number of local high schoolers, has posted its sixth consecutive year of record-high applications—receiving 42,544 submissions for 6,000 freshman spots in the class that started in September. Nearly three-quarters of Michigan applicants last year came from out of state, and recruiters have worked hard to court students from states like California and Texas, visiting more than 400 high schools and 170 college fairs outside Michigan, an increase over prior years. (The school also added in-state visits to bolster its appeal to locals.)

Student information from third-party firms allows schools to send narrowly targeted messages. About 1,100



*Northeastern University student Jordan Lieberman leads a campus tour this month. Photo by Dominick Reuter for The Wall Street Journal*

colleges buy data from the College Board's Student Search Service, sorting through information from more than 6 million students who opted to receive campus-marketing materials when they took standardized tests, including the SAT, that are administered by the College Board. Colleges pay 34 cents per record, which they can screen by test scores and prospective majors, among other criteria.

A more advanced search tool from the College Board costs \$15,000 and creates lists of students most likely to apply to and enroll in a given school based on factors including ZIP code, family income and average acceptance rate at peer colleges. Other companies offer similar databases.

Buying names from databases, Northeastern sends personalized introductory letters to nearly 200,000 high-school students, following up with six to eight emails over several weeks, says Jane Brown, Northeastern's vice president of enrollment.

While acceptance rates are a small part of how U.S. News calculates selectivity, they can shape perceptions among high-school counselors and improve alumni giving, which also contribute to the rankings.

A growing applicant pool also leads to higher revenue as schools target wealthier candidates, who need less financial aid.

While schools market online, they have cut back little on paper mailings. They find that students can refer back to the material again, while an email is easily deleted. Making the mail deluge a contest, students at University High School in Tucson, Ariz., are weighing the paper appeals they receive, with the current leader logging nearly 60 pounds.

"It seems like I get at least one piece of snail mail every day," says Iris Buckingham, a senior at McMinnville High School in McMinnville, Ore. She says she now just tosses letters straight into a drawer or the recycling bin and files emails, unopened, into a folder.

Ms. Buckingham, who touts a GPA just below 4.0 and plans to study business communication, is completing applications for eight schools, including Boston College, New York University and Linfield College, where her father works.

Meanwhile, some schools are making it simpler or cheaper to apply. Many now send unsolicited "fee waivers," long reserved for low-income students, hoping the price cut

and special attention will entice students. Others, including the University of Pittsburgh, offer shorter applications to some students.

As colleges grow more selective, many seniors—especially from affluent families—feel they must apply to more schools to be sure they will land somewhere, says Don Hossler, an Indiana

University professor who studies college enrollment.

In 2011, nearly 29% of applicants applied to seven or more schools, up from about 11% in 1997, according to the Higher Education Research Institute at University of California, Los Angeles. Nearly 5% of last year's college freshmen applied to 12 or more colleges, up from 1% in 1997.

That makes it harder for schools to predict which accepted students eventually will attend. Although it has grown more selective, Northeastern still accepted 32% of applicants last year—more than five times

the number of freshmen who will be on campus come fall.

