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Apply yourself

Colleges looking for more than good test scores

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Union-Endicott High School senior Chandler Jones thinks about the college application process from when he wakes in the morning until he goes to bed at night.

His classmate, Olivia Schofield, does much the same. "I feel overwhelmed," she said.

"I'm stressed when I start thinking about it," fellow classmate Matt Ruggieri said.

The three students are living through first semester of senior year, a time when anxiety levels rise as seniors run the gantlet of applying for college. A typical student will apply to between five and eight schools, said Kate Auchinachie, a guidance counselor at Chenango Forks High School. And they're applying at time when competition to gain entrance to selective colleges is more intense than ever.

Still, students can keep the task manageable and improve their chances for success by following some rules, said Auchinachie and guidance counselors at Union-Endicott High School and Owego Free Academy.

Auchinachie's advice is to stay organized and take the process in chunks. "If students do small steps for each part of the process, it's not so overwhelming," she said.

Some other guidelines include:

Compile a record: Don't think acing the SAT exam or writing a brilliant essay will get you into the college of your choice.

The most important factor in admissions, by far, is the strength of student's academic program all the way through high school, said Brian Hazlett, senior associate director of undergraduate admissions at Binghamton University.

Selective colleges look to see "whether students took the most rigorous program they could at their particular high school," and their grade point averages in relation to other students', he said.

That means students need to build a record starting in freshman year, counselors said. They should take the most rigorous courses they think they can do well in, and compile a record of activities outside the classroom.

Less is more: Don't think you have to sign up for 100 activities in high school,

While colleges are looking for a well-rounded applicant, they prefer to see

a student excel, or take a leadership role, in a few extracurricular activities rather than just show up for a long list of clubs, said Tom Westcott, a school counselor at Owego Free Academy.

And students shouldn't forget to put down work experience because colleges rate this as well, he said.

Start early: The earlier a senior begins the application process, the better, counselors said. A rule of thumb is to have applications in by Thanksgiving, said John Lenzo, a guidance counselor at Union-Endicott High School.

"Don't wait until December to start thinking about colleges," Auchinachie said. She recommends students have their resumes in place by the start of senior year so they can use them in approaching people for letters or recommendation.

"Don't procrastinate," Westcott emphasized. Students need to be aware of deadlines set by colleges and follow directions in the application process.

Applying for early action or an early decision could increase a student's chance of admission, Westcott said. But a student should only do this if he, or she, is truly serious about a college.

Do research: A person wouldn't spend thousands of dollars on a car, or

house, without doing research: The same rule applies to college, counselors said.

The research should focus on whether a college meets an individual student's needs, Union-Endicott guidance counselor John Perrino said. Does a college offer majors a student wants to pursue? Is the size, and location, a good fit? Does it offer internships?

The research can be done online, through college source books and by accessing colleges' Web sites. Students also should not be reluctant to contact college admissions offices with questions because it shows they have an interest in a college, counselors said.

But an essential step in the research process is visiting a college in person, counselors emphasized. "A college has to feel right," Lenzo said.

Be careful: Don't blow your chances by rushing an application and being sloppy, counselors said. Students need to commit time to the process. They also need to commit time and effort to writing, rewriting and editing their college essays. And they should have at least one other person proofread the essay.

Waiting until the last minute increases chances of mistakes, Lenzo said. "You

want to show quality and care, not being rushed and haphazard," he said.

Other tips: A key strategy is to apply for a range of colleges, counselors said. At least one of the colleges should be "a reach" school, one should be a "safe" school that a student is fairly certain of being admitted to, and others should be in the middle.

Students also should plan to take a standardized entrance exam, such as the SAT, at least twice because that's what colleges are looking for, Auchinachie said. A growing number of schools are also requiring the ACT.

And students need to avoid the senior slump. "Colleges, especially selective colleges, look for rigor in the senior year," Auchinachie said.

Students also need to maintain their grade point averages in their senior year to qualify for scholarship money, Westcott said.

Jacalyn Valdes, a senior at Chenango Forks High, took college application advice to heart.

In fact, she's already finished applying to five colleges. Her friends "are kind of in shock" that she's so far along in the process, Valdes said. But she wanted to get finished early. "I kind of got the weight off my shoulders," she said.