



5,822 extremely qualified applicants. 540 places in the Class of 2009. 11 admission officers balancing scores of priorities from the campus community. The Alumni Review dishes up the College's ...

Recipe for Success

“Man, these kids are really smart, aren't they?” Richard Nesbitt '74 asks quietly, with a gentle shake of the head. Sitting at a conference table in Bascom House, the Williams admission director is surrounded by his staff, but he's more or less talking to himself, because the answer is abundantly clear. He utters the question with as much dismay as delight, since he knows that being smart—incredibly smart—is not enough to get some very talented young people into Williams these days.

It's the middle of March, and Nesbitt and 10 other admission officers are deciding who should be among the 540 or so members of the Class of 2009. The applicant they're discussing at the moment, Arun Ajarati,* has stunning academic credentials: a combined 1570 on his SATs (out of a maximum 1600), all A's on his high school transcript and 710 or higher on five SAT2 exams.

But even Arun's eye-popping achievements won't ensure him a spot: The admission staff wait-listed or rejected nearly 300 of the 675 applicants to whom they had given their top “Academic 1” rating—a pool of students that,

on average, ranked in the top 3 percent of their high school classes and had SAT scores of 1545.

Arun, however, appears to be the complete package. He participates in a slew of activities: National Honor Society, tae kwon do (he has a black belt), Model United Nations and the honors orchestra. And his intellectual curiosity and thirst—described by his teachers and counselors and exemplified by having taken distance-education courses from Stanford in his spare time, among other things—impresses the committee.

“Everything really shouts out his *amazingness*,” one admission officer has written in his file. “God just gave him more than most,” writes another. When the committee votes, he is admitted easily.

Meanwhile, on paper, Jennifer Johnson's* credentials meet or exceed Arun's. She scored a perfect 1600 on the SAT and had another perfect score on one of her four achievement tests. But while she won regional honors for her school's swim team, her extracurricular record is otherwise a little thin, and her essay leaves many of the reviewers cold. Most important, as the admission team weighs her

**Names of applicants
have been changed.*

By Doug Lederman • Illustrations by Rowan Barnes-Murphy



application, one member offers this assessment: Despite her high grades and test scores, “I can’t discern any real intellectual spark.” The verdict: wait-list.

The competition for admission to Williams and other elite colleges has escalated to a point that astounds anyone who applied to college two decades ago or more. Students feel enormous pressure not just to perform academically in high school (if not earlier), but also to involve themselves in the

widest possible range of extracurricular and community service activities. And still that may not be enough, especially for students (or, more likely, their parents) who define the range of acceptable college destinations narrowly, aimed at the perceived top of the higher education food chain.

“There are too many people who think, ‘If I don’t get into Williams or Yale or Stanford, life is over,’” says Williams President Morty Schapiro. “But the admission game shouldn’t be about getting into the school that’s highest ranked in *U.S. News*. It’s about finding the



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best fit for your kid, not about the sticker you can put on the back of your car. I worry that some parents care more about that than about their kids.”

Williams is not immune from this phenomenon, as anyone whose son or daughter has applied to the College in the past decade surely knows. The crush of applications and the heightened competitiveness has come at the same time that Williams, like many institutions of its kind, has made a higher priority of admitting a student body more representative of today’s high school-age population. In essence, the thinking goes, the more Williams looks like the world, the better prepared *all* of its students will be to become leaders in that world.

What the admission office must do, then, is select from among every five applicants, almost all of them stellar, the one student who will make the most of his or her time at Williams and contribute to other students’ education. That means students of great academic promise, but also those who bring to campus a variety of talents, backgrounds and experiences.

Such decisions are not made in isolation; rather the admission office is plugged into the wider campus community, including the coaches of Williams’ 32 intercollegiate teams seeking guards, goalies or golfers; student and professional groups in search of flutists, dancers and painters; and alumni hoping that their sons or daughters will have a chance to experience the place they love. Oh, yes, and the faculty, who want as many engaged, committed, vibrant students in their classrooms, art studios, labs and performance spaces as possible.

An outsider sitting in on the admission process observes many things: the seriousness of purpose, leavened with equal parts missionary zeal and self-effacing respect for the applicants, with which the staff undertakes its work; the delicate dance the committee engages in to balance its many priorities; and perhaps most powerful of all, the jaw-dropping credentials and achievements of the terrifically talented young people whom Williams is attracting these days.



It’s not as though it was easy to get into Williams 20 or even 40 years ago. In 1962, the first year for which the admission office has electronic records, 1,501 young men applied to the College. Of those, 35 percent were accepted. The entering class of 288 had an average combined SAT score of 1280 (SAT scores being the most readily available comparison across several decades).

From there, the number of applicants began to grow. Beginning in the 1980s and through the early 1990s, the average pool was about 4,500 per year, with only a quarter admitted, despite the fact that class sizes grew to as many as 519. Average SAT scores during that time rose steadily to the 1330s.

Since then, the number of young people applying to Williams and other highly selective colleges has shot up even more, driven both by growth in the number of college-age people (the Baby Boom echo) and by the prevailing view that a degree from an elite college will have huge economic, intellectual and social payoffs. By the 2004-05 academic year, 5,822 high schoolers had applied to Williams, which, in looking to fill about 540 slots, admitted just 18.8 percent of them.

As the numbers have risen, so too has the intensity of the College’s efforts to ensure, as Schapiro says, that Williams has the “best students in the world, regardless of their family circumstances.”

Despite this long-standing commitment, research (much of it conducted by the Williams Project on the Economics of Higher Education) has shown that highly qualified students from low-income backgrounds are underrepresented among the most selective colleges and universities. As a result, according to a 2004 study, 74 percent of students attending the nation’s top colleges and universities come from families in the top income quintile (earning more than about \$92,000 annually), while 9 percent come from the bottom two quintiles (typically earning less than \$40,000 per year).

So Williams has taken several steps this decade to make its student body more socioeconomically diverse. In addition to





extending its need-blind admission policy to international students and expanding financial aid to meet 100 percent of all families' demonstrated need, the College is recruiting in more cities and schools that serve low-income students. This past year, Williams also joined Questbridge, a nonprofit initiative that matches colleges with highly talented underprivileged students.

Though this thrust produces many benefits for the College—providing exceptional students the opportunity to learn from each others' experiences and backgrounds—it has another undeniable effect: intensifying the already stiff competition for admission slots.

Students apply to Williams in one of two ways: for early decision or regular admission. The College admits between a third and two-fifths of its total freshman class through early decision in December; those students apply only to Williams and commit to enrolling if accepted. Most of those who are turned down join the regular pool of applicants, which the admission team begins reviewing in January. (For the Class of 2009, nearly 500 students applied early decision; of those, nearly 300 were turned down.)

From January until late March, when acceptance letters are mailed, the admission team works on whittling the regular pool of applicants (5,822 for the Class of 2009) to between 1,000 and 1,100 admitted students, of whom it expects nearly half to enroll in the fall.

The office creates a folder for each candidate, stuffed with high school transcripts, the students' essays and recommendations from teachers, counselors and (sometimes) peers. Many applicants—particularly performers or artists—also submit tapes, portfolios or DVDs of their work to be evaluated by the music, dance, theater or art departments.

The full-time admission staffers, plus a handful of helpers like Phil Smith '55 (Nesbitt's predecessor as director), pore over the folders. Two readers examine each folder independently, without seeing each other's comments, and assess them in three major ways. Each applicant gets an academic rating

from 1 to 9 that focuses heavily on his or her high school grades, standardized test scores, the rigor of his or her academic program within the context of the school setting and the strength of teacher recommendations. Then there is a non-academic rating from 1 to 6, assessing a student's level and length of involvement in school and outside activities.

The readers also assign any of more than 30 "attributes" that admission uses to identify exceptional traits. Some of these are easily quantified, such as being the child or grandchild of an alumnus, a member of a minority group, an "impact" athlete or a local resident. Other more subjective "tags" draw attention (usually but not always favorably) to something special about a candidate, like a powerful passion or aptitude for scientific research or an interest in getting a non-science Ph.D. Among the most significant of these is the "intellectual vitality" or "IVIT" code, which marks a candidate as having "extraordinary academic depth/talent" or being a "classroom catalyst who would have a significant impact in labs or class discussions," according to the office's written guidelines. With so many applicants with comparably impressive academic records, the attributes are often the tipping point.

The admission office has paid extra attention in the last few years to its "socio-ec" tags, which identify students who hail from an "obvious modest/low-income background" or whose parents did not attend college. This is the only way that a student's financial situation is discussed by the admission office, as Williams is one of only a few dozen colleges in the country that ensures applicants will be admitted





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without regard to whether they can afford to pay for college. Williams, in turn, commits to meeting all students' full demonstrated financial need.

If the first and second readers' academic ratings differ by more than a point, they put their heads together to try to reach a consensus rating. In general, all applicants with a combined academic rating of 3 or higher are rejected at this point, unless the first and second readers have identified one or more "attributes" that warrant additional consideration.

By late February, the readers identify 200 or more students who stand out so clearly that they receive letters offering admission a few weeks ahead of the rest of the regular admittees. These "early writes," as Williams calls them, are typically highly coveted by other colleges. By admitting them a bit earlier, arranging for department chairs or coaches to phone or write urging them to accept, and, in a small number of cases, offering to fly them in for campus visits, Williams hopes to get a leg up in the wooing process. (The College tends not to "early write" students from high schools where many candidates have applied to Williams, however, so as not to send parents and school counselors into a tizzy by accepting one student weeks ahead of others.)

In the case of the Class of 2009, Williams admitted 209 students "early decision" in December and then 200 as "early writes" in February. Another 11 students selected for the Class of 2008 but who postponed their enrollment were also on the roster.

The admission committee now gives a third read to the 2,000 remaining applications and then convenes in early March to begin formal deliberations to select the final 600 or so admittees. Meeting six hours a day in the conference room in Bascom, the 10 officers plow through lists of students as Nesbitt reads from the one-page cards readers have filled out about each applicant. In some cases, debate is extensive and the assembled vote thumbs up or thumbs down. In a relative handful of others, the committee more or less listens to decisions determined in advance by Nesbitt.



As they gather on a Monday morning two weeks into deliberations, Nesbitt fills in the staffers on where they stand—part statistical review, part pep-talk.

"So far we've admitted 803 students," he says, providing breakdowns by sex and race, those with alumni connections, international students and the number admitted through athletic "tips"—requests from coaches for some extra nod in an athlete's direction because of his or her ability to help a team or teams.

"We're down a little bit on IVITs from last year, so we may want to do a little more there," Nesbitt says. "We're ahead on socio-ecs, so that's good."

Then, because just two weeks remain before the acceptance letters go out, and more than 300 Academic 1's and scores more Academic 2's still need to be considered, it's time to get to work.

The admission officers gathered around the conference room table in Bascom are an eclectic group. Several, like Connie Sheehy '75, Fran Lapidus and Karen Parkinson, have a decade or more of experience at Williams; others, like Geraldine Shen '01, Mark Robertson '02 and Rob Rivas '01, are recent grads. Each has his or her own interests and biases—some are particularly behind the push for diversity, others are skeptical about sports; some focus intently on applicants' academic profiles, while others seem especially partial to students who they think will be leaders on campus or contribute powerfully in some social or extracurricular way.

But following the lead of the low-key Nesbitt, they work seamlessly together. Serious disagreement about whom to admit is far less common than bantering about how wide to open the windows to keep the room comfortable or the healthfulness of the snacks they take turns bringing in to keep them sharp (or awake) through the hours of deliberations. (Sheehy, who suffered a heart attack running to catch a plane while returning from an eight-day recruiting trip two years ago, pushes fruit and vegetables, while Lauren Lynch, who as of March is eight months pregnant, craves cookies and chips.)





"We're each looking for different things, given our differing backgrounds and differing interests, but we all have a sense of who's going to really come alive here and be a good Williams student," says Robertson. "Dick sets the tone, with his steady hand and the signal he sends that he really does want and value input from everybody on the committee."

As an outsider, it is hard not to be overwhelmed by what the applicants have accomplished, and not just in the classroom. One student has turned the death of his brother into a personal crusade to stop drunk driving. Another played piano at Carnegie Hall. Seemingly dozens are supplementing their high school courses with online classes from places like Stanford or weekend programs at Columbia.

Even the admission officers seem to recognize—in self-deprecating ways—how special the applicants are. During discussion of one particularly amazing high schooler, associate director Gina Coleman '90 jokes that she's lucky to have applied to Williams when she did. "We couldn't get in here again," she says. "I was primed in the late '80s for this place, but not now."

Tuesday morning, President Schapiro sits in on the committee's deliberations, as he does a few times each year. He wants to have a first-hand sense of what the applicants look like and what the committee is focusing on, so that he can answer the many questions he gets from alumni and others when he's traveling. "Plus, those of us on the faculty have a lot at stake about the students we admit," says Schapiro, a professor of economics who teaches each semester.

Schapiro doesn't vote on applicants, and he mainly listens quietly, occasionally throwing out a wry aside to lighten the mood. Comments from the readers about peer and competitor colleges, especially Amherst, are common, but not all are digs. When the panel admits a student whom everyone agrees would be a huge asset to Williams—"an intensely competitive kid with the soul of a novelist," as one of his teachers described him—its members

seem to know he's aiming even higher. "He's not going to come here," one officer says.

If any one deliberation sums up the challenges and choices facing admission as it works to craft the Class of 2009, it's the case of Jacob Cohen.* Ranked fourth in a class of nearly 300 in his suburban New York high school, with a perfect 1600 on the SATs and perfect 5's on five Advanced Placement tests, Jacob clearly impresses the readers with his intelligence. But one offers the sentiment, oft-heard around this sterling academic record, "There's nothing to find fault with, but nothing to put him over the top, either."

After a few moments, the committee seems to be heading toward a vote to reject him when one member notes Jacob's strong interest in biology, that he has participated in national science competitions and the fact that the pool of admitted students so far contains fewer than the ideal number of potential research scientists. (Jacob also manages to find time to compete on two varsity sports teams.) After a few more minutes of discussion, Lynch says with some exasperation: "It's cruel—he couldn't *possibly* be doing any more than he's doing, could he?"

With that comment, which could apply to so many of the applicants Williams both admits and rejects, the tide for this high schooler, at least, has turned. Here's your invitation, Jacob, to the Class of 2009. ■

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