

# How Harvard gets its best and brightest

SURE, students work hard to get into this elite college. But so does the admissions committee, assures Dean Bill Fitzsimmons.

In the US, few competitions are more cutthroat than the college admissions game. And every year it grows more intense as an ever-larger pool of high school seniors apply for one of the coveted spots at the nation's top colleges. Meanwhile, the elite colleges have been stepping up their efforts to attract the best and brightest students – the prized pupils who will help increase the prestige of their campuses.

You might assume that Harvard College – blessed with higher education's greatest brand name and an endowment second to none – could afford to remain relatively aloof from this battle. But in reality, 'There is no place that works harder than we do,' says William R 'Bill' Fitzsimmons, Harvard's veteran dean of admissions.

For the new academic year, which will start in September, Harvard received a near-record 23,000 applications. Of these, it accepted a mere 2,100 – or just 9% – ranking it as the nation's most selective college. Even more impressive, some 80% of the chosen ultimately decided to attend Harvard – a rate that is easily the highest among colleges and universities.

The real surprise, however, is how hard Harvard works behind the scenes to achieve these amazing results. From his corner office in Byerly Hall, Fitzsimmons oversees a carefully considered three-part battle plan. The first phase begins in the spring, when Harvard mails letters to a staggering 70,000-or-so high school juniors – all with stellar test scores – suggesting they consider applying to America's best-known college. Harvard buys their names from the examination boards which administer aptitude and college-admission tests.

Each year, Harvard's admissions team tours 140 US cities, as well as hundreds of other places in Latin America, Europe, Africa and the Far East. This year, 10% of the admitted students came from abroad. In addition to his staff of 35, Fitzsimmons enlists Harvard's coaches and professors to look for talent. The math department, for instance, starts to identify budding math geniuses by keeping a close eye on kids doing well in math contests.

Harvard students also get into the act. Since 2003, Harvard has hired fifteen to twenty low-income students to call and email promising low-income high school students. Their job: to counter the 'impression that Harvard is only for the rich and elite,' says Fitzsimmons. In fact, under Harvard's relatively new financial aid policies, parents who make less than \$60,000 a year aren't expected to pay anything toward the annual \$43,700 fee for tuition, room and board. Fitzsimmons also sends an army of some 8,000 alumni volunteers to tour the country to identify and recruit promising high school students by holding



shows where they live. Later, they also interview nearly all applicants.

By then, Fitzsimmons will be deep into the second phase of his battle plan: sifting through the thousands of applicants. Every application is rated on a scale of one (the best ever) to six (the worst ever). Then, in February, the applications are divided up geographically among twenty subcommittees. 'We present the case for each applicant like a lawyer would,' says Fitzsimmons. 'This is the polar opposite of a computer process and because we have so many people involved, there are lots of checks and balances.'

Once the final decisions have been made, Fitzsimmons and his team move to phase three: an all-out push to convince the chosen few to attend Harvard. Professors, alumni and students are all recruited to start calling the admitted. And in mid to late April over half of those who were accepted typically show up at Harvard for an elaborate weekend.

The Harvard pitch is clearly effective. 'What we aim to do is to get the very best faculty together with the very best students,' Fitzsimmons says. 'Our hope is that these synergies will develop the talents of these students to a much greater degree and that they will then give back a lot more to America and the world.' That belief may sound corny, but it's clearly helped drive Harvard to go to enormous lengths to find the best and brightest.