

# Shyness and the College Admission Process:

## Who is Being Left Out?

By Thomas A. Hanley, Jr.

A worried parent called me some years ago, anxious about her son's prospects for admission to highly competitive schools. Near the top of his class, exhaustively involved, and a model of sincerity, her son was the perfect college applicant. Moreover, his enviable board scores and highly demanding honors/AP curriculum only served to bolster his chances for admission to the most competitive colleges and universities. "But," said his panicked mother, her voice breaking with emotion, "he's so *shy*."

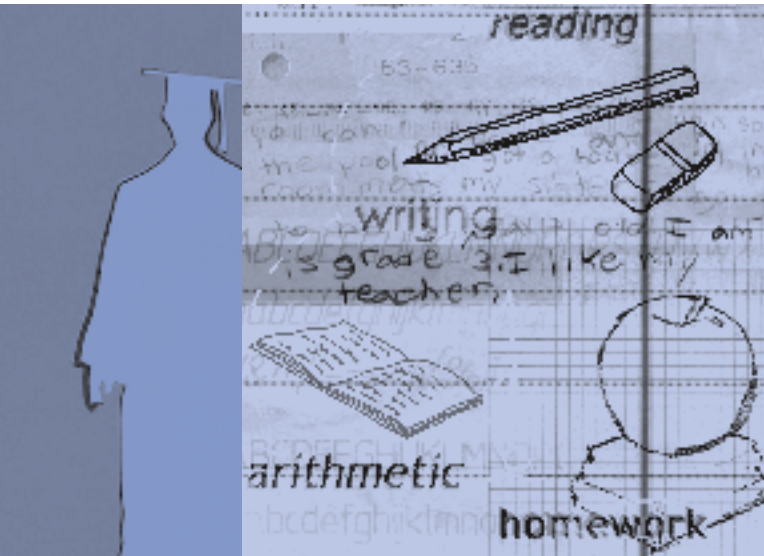
The boy's mother had convinced herself that her violin-playing, science-loving, varsity athlete son would be left out in the cold by the college admission process because he was, well, *quiet*. "Can you imagine him in an interview," continued his mother, "and what will his teachers say in their recommendations about his class participation?" (or lack thereof). Introducing a little humor to ease her tension I replied, "do you really believe these colleges want their campuses full of screaming extroverts? Imagine what a headache that would be!" She burst into laughter at this image, but I had also hoped my comment would help her to realize that college admission committees seek all types of individuals in "shaping" a class; they desire a diversity of personalities, cultures, talents, and interests to enhance the academic and social climate on their campuses.

Yet, in the depths of my own introverted soul, I knew this mother had an insightful, sadly realistic point. If two applicants appeared academically equivalent on paper and

both were interviewing at a top tier school, the gregarious, self-confident candidate would most likely be perceived more favorably than the timid and self-conscious one. In the college interview or in teacher recommendations, the truth would be found out: "he was uncomfortable with himself," the interviewer's notes might say, or "she didn't say much, she seemed tense." In the teacher recommendation letters, the same sentiment might be conveyed more gingerly: "although a quiet young man, Michael has excellent test scores." Bad news all around. Beyond that, the candidate's social reticence could be further evidenced by a lack of leadership roles in school activities, or very limited involvement in extracurricular programs.

New York real estate brokers have a favorite term for a critical negative aspect that makes an apartment hard to sell—the "fatal flaw" (e.g., busy street, no elevator, street-level apartment, etc.). Is social reticence, shyness, or introversion a "fatal flaw" for applicants in some college admission offices?

In Jacques Steinberg's well-known admission chronicle, *The Gatekeepers* (Viking Penguin, 2002), the admission committee at Wesleyan University (CT) is found, at one point, deliberating the candidacy of a very strong female applicant. "All recs mention how shy she used to be," say the notes of a Wesleyan admission officer, "[she] still came across that way in interview." The reader is left with the impression that this candidate's shyness worked against her in the admission process; ultimately, Wesleyan rejected her.



"My staff and I struggle with this all time," said a dean of admission from a prestigious university at a conference I attended recently. He was referring to leadership skills and how much weight they should bear in the admission process when compared with other desirable, but more subtle experiences and personality traits. The dean continued, "can you imagine a campus full of leaders where every kid on campus wants to run for student government president? What a nightmare!" While the image of hundreds of assertive, hyper candidates running for office proved to be greatly amusing, his comments were also reassuring. Admission committees at some colleges are apparently questioning the propensity to favor students who evidence leadership, and who are probably naturally outgoing, in seeking to balance and diversify the personalities and contributors in the campus community.

Moreover, in our multi-ethnic society important cultural implications should be considered when evaluating the contributions of an applicant. For example, as colleges and universities strive for diversity in admission, an increasing number of applicants are appearing from cultures that do not prize and foster American-style extroversion. Could appli-

cants from Asian, European, African, or Latino backgrounds be perceived negatively in the event that their cultural tradition does not encourage them to be gregarious or extroverted? Is it possible that students who hail from cultures that *encourage* assertiveness have some kind of advantage in the admission process?

As I write letters of recommendation for my students, I often struggle for ways to present shy applicants in the most positive light. "Jennifer is a quiet leader who conveys caring and selflessness by her actions," I might say; or "Chris is a real observer, he is keenly aware of his environment and the needs of others." Sometimes we counselors find it appropriate and fitting to enlist some time-worn clichés to describe timid students with the hope of capturing their richness of spirit: "when I think of Barbara, I am reminded of the phrase 'still waters run deep.'"

Those of us working in high schools know something special about each of our students, yet we realize that for some of them it won't be gleaned from a forty-five minute college interview. It is in coming to know them *over time* that we learn that the meekest can, often enough, speak with the most powerful and influential voice, but the dilemma of how to convey this prevails. Earlier in my career, a caring, superb teacher at my school approached me in the hallway with an exasperated look. "John asked me to write a recommendation," she exclaimed, "he is a good student but he is so *quiet* I have nothing to say—and I don't want to say that he's quiet."

One of the most heartening moments a high school teacher or counselor can experience is when a former student, known for being self-conscious and awkward in high school, returns to visit some years later brimming with self-confidence. Encounters such as these poignantly demonstrate that college applicants are on the brink of the greatest thrust toward independence and self-actualization in their budding lives. They are very much *en medias res*, unfinished, still being formed as persons. Is it not the role of the university to facilitate this process and awaken dormant leadership qualities while instilling confidence in students with burgeoning potential? Do colleges seek a finished product in their applicants for admission—or a masterpiece in the making? Though obviously hard to predict at the outset, a socially reticent college applicant could be the next creative genius of history, who goes on to shake the world.

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As professionals on both sides of the admission desk, there are several questions we should ask ourselves with regard to this issue. For example, do outgoing students make more positive contributions to the academic milieu and social fabric of a university than reserved students—or are their contributions simply more visible? Do college communities and residence halls need *listeners* as well as talkers? Should we recognize that a particular applicant may not necessarily electrify a campus community, but instead consider what they may do in their careers for science or the alleviation of human suffering? What of contributions to mankind, how have the introverts fared over the years?

With regard to the latter, there are several giants from history we might want to consider—introverts who, in spite of their human complexities and personal issues, shook the world. We can start with the man whom we honor every time we flick on the lights: Thomas Edison. Historical accounts note how Edison endured taunts and cruelty in his youth for

his high-pitched voice and extreme shyness—belying his wonderfully prominent future as “the most influential figure of the millennium” (*LIFE Magazine*, Fall, 1997). How would Edison have survived today's college admission committee table? Would a less than stellar performance in his interview have derailed his chances for admission?

Ulysses S. Grant, Civil War hero and 18th President of the United States, was in his earlier years an anxious, tongue-tied adolescent. He was painfully shy as a boy, so much so that he was thought to be “stupid.” Consequently, his peers referred to him not as “Ulysses,” but as “Useless.” Would Grant have been passed over for a more self-assured candidate in light of today's admission criteria?

We can find, too, a kindred spirit in Clara Barton (the “Angel of the Battlefield”), founder of the American Red Cross. Barton had been desperately insecure in her youth, but went on to live out her life as a national heroine. Indeed, we can gain great insight from the lives of people like Eleanor Roosevelt and J.D. Salinger who felt, at one juncture or another in their lives, extremely uncomfortable in their own skin. Yet they pursued their lives' missions and crafts with determination and brilliance.

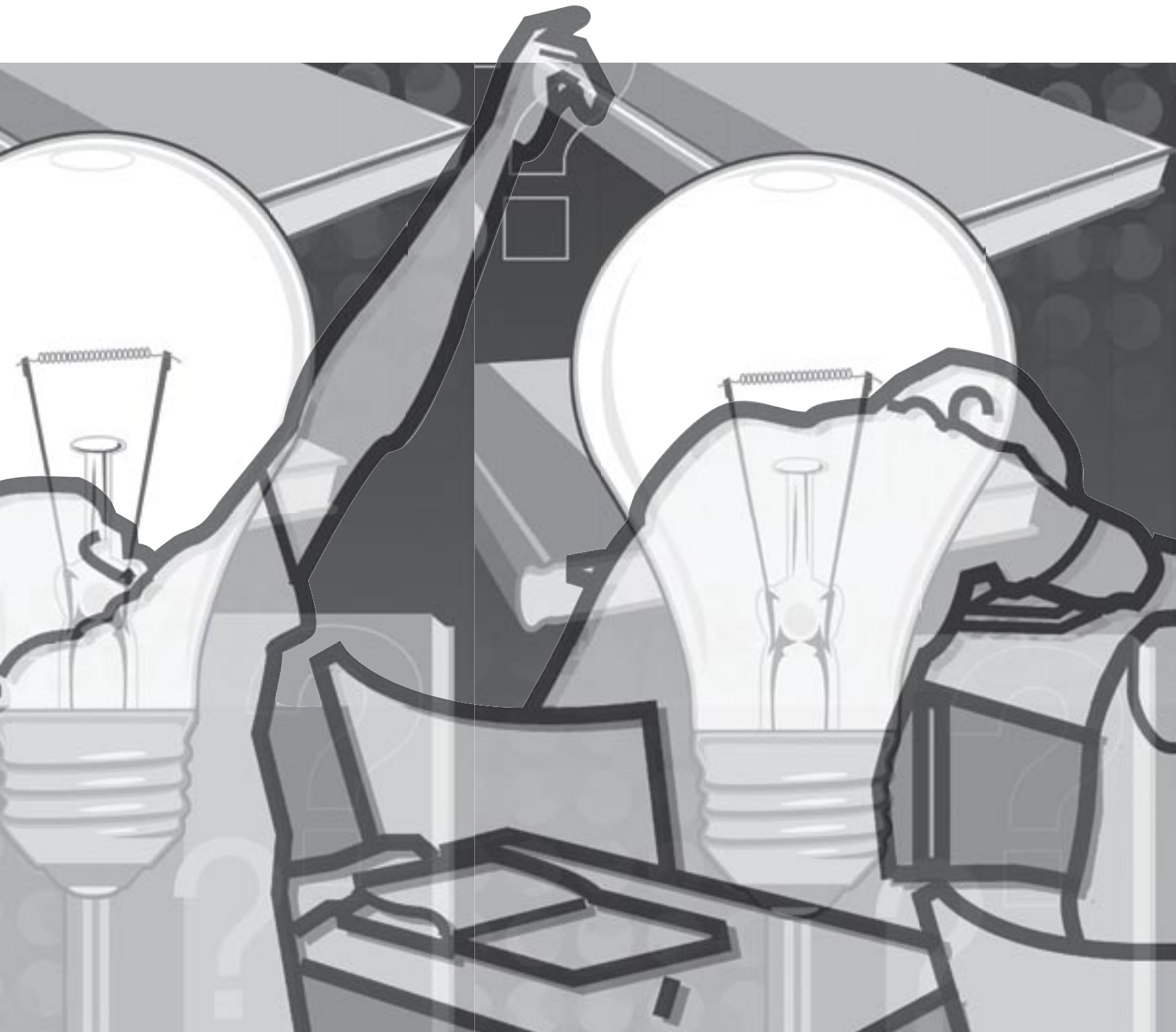
Artists and writers, leaders and statesmen, so many of our historical icons initially faced the public with more than a good bit of angst and social timidity, but they possessed within them a rich inner life and a fiery passion that inspired them to leave their mark on the world. They simply needed the opportunity to contribute, and the support of people who and institutions that believed in them.

Who might we be seeing in this year's applicant pool? A future Lincoln, Gandhi, or Emily Dickinson—socially inhibited or demure people destined for greatness? Indeed, the evaluation of the intellectual and social skills of applicants in the college admission process is fraught with complexities of all kinds. It is crucial to remind ourselves of the unbridled potential of our youth—both the dominant and the meek.

## REFERENCES

Jacques Steinberg, *The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), page 100.

*Life Magazine*, Fall, 1997, p. 135.



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