

The Rise of 'Stealth Applicants'

By ERIC HOOVER

They come out of nowhere. They do not call first, or request a pamphlet, or even take a tour. They are "stealth applicants."

That is the name some admissions deans have given to the growing number of students whose first contacts with colleges are their admissions applications. Such students are complicating enrollment-management strategies and reshaping the traditional dynamic between colleges and prospective students.

Some admissions officials say they welcome out-of-nowhere applications, which can substantially increase their pools of potential enrollees. Others complain that the influx of such students makes it more difficult to predict the all-important yield rate — the proportion of accepted students who choose to attend.

In the past, colleges have used the number of student "inquiries" to predict how many applications they will receive in a given cycle. Now, though, inquiry numbers have less predictive value.

"Some colleges feel like they're losing a little control of the process," says *Patricia Casey*, senior vice president at *Maguire Associates*, an education-consulting firm in Bedford, Mass., "because they can't cultivate relationships with students who aren't known to them. Others see it as an inevitable consequence of how we've taught students to get information."

Call it the Web effect. More students are using the Internet to find information about colleges, and they can learn almost anything about an institution while surfing, anonymously, in their pajamas. And more of them are taking advantage of the proliferation of online applications, many of which do not require them to register before applying.

"We hear them talking about how deluged they get from mailings," says Ms. Casey. "They feel like the Web gives them an opportunity to put their foot in the water without having to make any kind of real commitment to the school."

In a recent survey, Maguire found that, at 21 percent of the colleges surveyed, students whose applications were their first contact with an institution made up 40 percent or more of that college's total applicant pool. Nineteen percent of the colleges said such applications accounted for 20 to 29 percent of all applicants, and 35 percent reported that the applications made up 10 to 19 percent of their applicant pool.

A majority of colleges — 75 percent — said their yield rate for stealth applicants was lower than that for other students. One explanation: Despite the widespread appeal of browsing colleges

online, many students are still more likely to attend an institution with which they have established some sort of contact.

Colleges that are wary of too many applicants popping out of the woodwork may choose to change their Web sites so that students must first provide personal information before accessing applications or other information, some admissions experts predict.

Some college officials, however, say the trend is nothing to fear.

"Students are taking more command of the admission process," says Charles S. Nolan, vice provost for enrollment management at Santa Clara University. "That's confounding to some of us in admissions, because the traditional way of reaching out to students is quickly going by the wayside. But it's a positive development."

Forty-three percent of applicants for Santa Clara's 2005 freshman class made their first contact with the university when they sent their applications. Admissions officials there have found that men are more likely than women to apply in that manner, and that such students tend to have less-distinguished academic records than other applicants do.

Still, Mr. Nolan says, the Web has helped raise Santa Clara's profile nationally. Since the university started accepting online applications three years ago, applications have increased 52 percent, with more students applying from outside California and the region.

One effect of the applications surge this spring: Many colleges are increasing the size of their wait lists, to hedge against increasing uncertainty about who will enroll. For some applicants, stealth may beget more suspense.