

Slackers Beware!

By Pappano, Laura. [The New York Times](#). (April 22, 2007)

YOU'RE not done.

You may have received a thick envelope with a perky congratulatory letter from the college admissions office. You may have told everyone you know (and some you don't) where you're going. You may have your new school hoodie in wardrobe rotation.

You're in, but remember: You're not done.

After being accepted at Franklin & Marshall College, in Lancaster, Pa., Isa Valera spent last spring doing everything, it seemed, but hitting the books. When she wasn't at her two jobs, she focused on prom, graduation from Frederick Douglass Academy in the Bronx and "hanging out with friends for the last time." Her grades fell from 80s and 90s to "barely passing."

Just weeks before classes were to begin, the college got in touch: admissions was rethinking her acceptance. "I was too ashamed to tell my mother," says Ms. Valera. "While she was running around and getting stuff for my room, I was thinking in my head, 'You might not want to do that.' "

Ultimately, Ms. Valera was allowed to enroll -- but only after she had written a contrite letter, completed an essay assigned by the admissions office on how she planned to structure her college life and agreed to meet monthly with the dean of admissions.

Senioritis has infected the college-bound since, oh, the beginning of time. But with a high-stress admissions process that begins in ninth grade, today's seniors may be more tempted than earlier ones to let up once they get in.

If anything, though, colleges are extending the admissions period by making sure students stay on track in that twilight between acceptance and arrival on campus.

While colleges and universities have always insisted students maintain top grades, more are now poring over midyear and final transcripts, mailing warnings or making phone calls to students with fallen averages. And in some cases, they're rescinding admission.

Many took note when the University of Washington revoked acceptances last summer for 23 would-be freshmen with poor final high school grades. The university had just moved to a holistic approach to admissions, thoroughly reviewing applications and final grades, as opposed to relying on an index of grade point average and test scores, as most large public universities do.

Officials also mailed out 180 warning letters telling students they were unhappy with their senior-year effort.

Philip A. Ballinger, Washington's director of admissions, calls rescinding acceptances "a matter of fairness."

"If certain students decided they didn't want to be students their senior year, we shouldn't have them here," he explains. Mr. Ballinger, like many higher education experts, is concerned that the emphasis on college admissions is making 12th grade "a wasted year." He hears complaints from high school counselors that once students are accepted they "just slack off."

The University of Colorado at Boulder rescinded admission for 45 students last year, including 10 who had been through freshman orientation, had selected classes and had even met their roommates. "It is the hardest time of year because it's very emotional for families and the students," says Kevin MacLennan, Colorado's admissions director.

The message that a **college acceptance is conditional** -- a point colleges have emphasized to little effect for years -- is finally getting a hearing. For one, colleges want students to stay the course and graduate. **"You want to be sure you**

are admitting students who will not struggle academically," says Susan E. Donovan, dean of admissions at Syracuse University. But they are also applying a more critical eye to final transcripts because waiting lists are bursting. With admissions offices receiving record numbers of applicants, they can insist students stay focused.

Last June 29, Abby Siegel, then a counselor at Stuyvesant High School, heard from a panicked mother after her son's admission to a liberal arts college on the West Coast was rescinded. His grades had fallen, from the 90s into the 70s. He had blogged about the drop, which alerted the admissions office. (Note to applicants: they do read your blogs.)

"The school had overbooked the freshman class," says Ms. Siegel, now an independent counselor in Manhattan. "They turned around and said, 'You are not living up to the standards we expected and you are no longer invited to attend this school.'" Although she scrambled and found a city university to take the student, it was hardly his top choice. "This is a bad life lesson to learn," she says.

This year, the University of Michigan received nearly 27,000 applications for September's 5,400 freshman spots, the largest class in its history, says Ted Spencer, associate vice provost and executive director of admissions. Incoming freshmen with poor final grades will receive one of three letters. Last year, 62 whose grades fell from A's to C's got a gentle warning, encouraging them to "take advantage of the counseling and academic support services offered by the university." Another 180 whose final grades were C's, D's and F's were told to explain in writing "the events that caused the decline in your performance." Students had to "provide supporting documentation from a physician, counselor, principal, teacher or any other person who can support your letter of explanation." In a few cases -- nine last year and 11 the previous year -- students received letters rescinding admission and suggesting they "are not yet ready to undertake the demanding and competitive programs offered here."

Mr. Spencer acknowledges that seniors may be burned out or overextended with nonacademic activities. Still, he notes, "we're seeing more students for a variety of reasons not having strong academic endings."

Unfortunately for such students, colleges don't receive final transcripts until June or July and may revoke admission as late as July or August -- after students have given up spots at other colleges and have few options. To avoid last-minute surprises, high school counselors advise that accepted students stay in touch about academics.

Steven Roy Goodman, a college admissions consultant in Washington, D.C., says that one student he is advising was admitted early to Northwestern, and once accepted, wanted to lighten her workload. After dropping one Advanced Placement course, she told the college of plans to drop English and take photography. It waved a red flag. If she did, the university would reconsider her acceptance. "She kept the course, which was the right answer," he says, noting that the communication avoided a potential problem.

Some admissions officials will give slackers a second chance. Franklin & Marshall rescinds a few acceptances each year, but Dennis Trotter, vice president for enrollment and dean of admissions, first allows those students at risk to demonstrate academic seriousness by reading a book and writing a 5- to 10-page essay on it. Last summer, some were assigned to read "Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds," by Richard J. Light. The admissions staff reads every essay, he says. "We are giving you a task to accomplish. If you basically blow it off and say it doesn't matter, it's very likely we will send a letter rescinding the offer."

The assignment turned out to be a boon for Ms. Valera, who insists the scare of having her admissions rescinded has made her a better student. "I'm definitely not complacent or nonchalant about my grades or how much time I devote to my studies," Ms. Valera says, speaking on her cellphone from the lobby of the Shadek-Fackenthal Library, where she was choosing a topic for an economics paper on Sierra Leone. "I don't want to get another letter saying 'You should go home now.'"