On-Campus Confidential

The latest trends in applying, achieving and learning about life at your dream college prove there's a place for every student.

Attracting The Digerati

Admissions offices are fighting for the best students by going where they increasingly live: online. You can see one cutting-edge example at admissions.umich.edu/vmerse. It's a 3-D interactive virtual tour of the Ann Arbor classrooms and campus, right down to squirrels scampering across a flawless emerald lawn, so idyllic it hardly seems real—which it isn't, of course. Admissions officers are keeping up with technology start-ups in their embrace of social media like blogs, instant messaging and sites such as Facebook, according to Nora Barnes of the University of Massachusetts. For their part, applicants are keeping pace by signing onto commercial sites like Zinch.com, Admish.com and EdSoup.com to make video and other pitches intended to supplement their official applications. Just think twice before posting your latest antics on Facebook or YouTube. Barnes says many admissions officers admit they're searching online to see what you're not disclosing on your forms. "Nobody wants to give a scholarship to somebody who's going to show up in the paper standing on a beer keg," says Barnes.

—JOHN SPARKS

More Than An Envelope

In December 2007, Shannon Moran was manning the cash register at PetSmart when she got a phone call. It was MIT admissions officer Ben Jones. He'd read on her blog that she had to be at work when early admits came out, and he didn't want her to wait for the good news. Then, a few days later, she got a cardboard tube in the mail, filled with an MIT poster, a congratulatory certificate, a dates-to-remember-filled refrigerator magnet—and confetti. After MIT began sending tubes three years ago, students started Facebook groups devoted to it and even invented a verb. Being "tubed" means you got in early.

MIT isn't the only school to send out creative acceptances. Stanford mails all 2,400 admitted students a bunch of tiny magnets with campus-specific magnetic words, like THE FARM, the school nickname. Admitted students to Yale hear the school's fight song when they log on; later, they get a pennant in the mail. "It made me feel so good that they really wanted to have me," says freshman Nicki Cohen. Getting in isn't enough?

—KAREN SPRINGEN

Take Our Kids — Ple

For all the talk about "helicopter parents," a few are actually inviting to write letters of recommenda-