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To Impress, Tufts Prospects Turn to YouTube

By **TAMAR LEWIN**

MEDFORD, Mass. — There are videos showing off card tricks, horsemanship, jump rope and stencils — and lots of rap songs, including one by a young woman who performed two weeks after oral surgery, with her mouth still rubber-banded shut.

There is also [Rhaina Cohen's video](#), working off the saying “You never truly know someone until you have walked a mile in her shoes,” and featuring the blue sandals from her bat mitzvah, the white sneakers she bought cheaply in Britain, and the black heels in which she “stood next to [Hillary Clinton](#).”

It is reading season at the Tufts University admissions office, time to plow through thousands of essays and transcripts and recommendations — and this year, for the first time, short YouTube videos that students could post to supplement their application.

About 1,000 of the 15,000 applicants submitted videos. Some have gotten thousands of hits on YouTube.

Tufts, which, like the [University of Chicago](#), is known for its quirky applications, invited the YouTube videos. Along with the required essays, Tufts has for years offered applicants an array of optional essays — “Are we alone?” is one of this year's topics — or a chance to “create something” out of a sheet of paper. So it was not too far a stretch, this year, to add the option of posting a one-minute video that “says something about you.”

Lee Coffin, the dean of undergraduate admissions, said the idea came to him last spring as he watched a YouTube video someone had sent him. “I thought, ‘If this kid applied to Tufts, I'd admit him in a minute, without anything else,’ ” Mr. Coffin said.

For their videos, some students sat in their bedrooms and talked earnestly into the camera, while others made day-in-the-life montages, featuring buddies, burgers and lacrosse practice. A budding D.J. sent clips from one of his raves, with a suggestion that such parties might be welcome at Tufts.

A few students created elaborate productions.

“We’ve got some who are really good with the technology,” Mr. Coffin said. “There’s a real technical savvy out there in this generation, and this lets them show off their splicing, their stop action, their animation. Some of the engineering applicants show us what they’ve made. One kid is talking, and then all of a sudden, he’s in the water, to show off his underwater camera.”

While elephants are a common theme in the videos — Jumbo the elephant is Tufts’s mascot — only Michael Klinker went so far as to build a small remote-control blue-elephant helicopter that flies merrily around his backyard.

Some of the videos have developed a YouTube following. The popular favorite is probably Amelia Downs, with more than 6,000 views for [her video](#) combining “two of my favorite things: being a nerd and dancing,” in which she performs a bar graph, a scatter plot, a pie chart, and a sine and cosine graph.

“I tried tap dancing at first, because that’s what I do most, but we only have a cheap digital camera, and the sound came out badly,” said Ms. Downs, who is from Charlotte, N.C. “My best friend filmed me, and we did each shot once or twice. I did the editing in about an hour, and the computer crashed five times while I was doing it.”

Still, Ms. Downs said she thought it was “very cool” that Tufts invited videos.

For a number of colleges, this is the year of the video, what with [Yale’s](#) 16-minute YouTube offering, “[That’s Why I Chose Yale](#),” a spoof of “High School Musical,” and “[Reading Season](#),” a musical by admissions counselors at the [University of Delaware](#).

Even without prompting, admissions officials say, a growing number of students submit videos. Maria Laskaris, the dean of admissions at Dartmouth, noticed the trend last year, and said this year had brought even more videos, mostly showcasing music, theater or dance talents.

For Tufts, the videos have been a delightful way to get to know the applicants.

“At heart, this is all about a conversation between a kid and an admissions officer,” Mr. Coffin said. “You see their floppy hair and their messy bedrooms, and you get a sense of who they are. We have a lot of information about applicants, but the videos let them share their voice.”

Videos are genuinely optional, he said, so not having one does not count against a student — and a bad video would not hurt an

applicant's admission chances "unless there was something really disgusting."

Mr. Coffin remains committed to the traditional essay-writing requirement. "We will never abandon writing," he said. "No matter what, it's important to be able to express yourself elegantly in writing."

But, he said, it is good for Tufts to show new-media savvy as well.

"Kids who are 17 and 18 are very facile with new media," he said, "and one of the challenges for colleges right now is to stay ahead of that curve."

To his surprise, about 60 percent of the videos are from women, and two-thirds are from financial-aid applicants, easing concern that the video option might help the already-advantaged affluent applicants.

Mr. Coffin said he never worried about YouTube privacy issues.

"These kids blog, they tweet, they don't seem to worry much about privacy," he said. "Maybe I was naïve, but it didn't occur to me that these videos would be so public, and so followed."

While the application allowed students to put their video on any easily accessible Web site, he said almost everybody used YouTube.

Having seen the popularity of the videos — and heard from current Tufts students who want their favorite applicants admitted — Mr. Coffin now plans to put the best ones into a "Tufts Idol" contest once admissions season is over.

"So much of what we do in admissions is opaque, and that contributes to all the frenzy," he said. "This is something that's completely transparent."