***The Truth About College Admission***

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**Preface**

Loving parents simply want their kids to have choices, options, and a happy, successful life. However, with understandably high hopes and expectations, parents often hinge future success on their children being admitted to a small subset of top-ranked and selective colleges. Entering and progressing through high school with this mentality can create a pressure cooker for families that leads to a constant focus and comparison of the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, ACT scores, achievements, awards, and titles, all in the name of “standing out” or “being enough” for college applications. Left unchecked, overtime, especially as students enter their final two years of high school, this dynamic can result in acute fissures in the family because the singular focus becomes “getting in.” *The Truth about College Admission* is meant to help you stay together as a family through this experience.

This book is written to put the college search and admission experience in perspective for your family. It runs counter to a few of the constant claims purported by the media: that there are only 25 great schools in our nation, that students have no chance of getting into a “good school,” and that they must perfectly follow a secret formula throughout high school to unlock success.

In this book, students and their families will find insights and tips but no tricks; metaphors and analogies will help frame why and how admission decisions are made, but there will be no promise or guarantees of acceptance to particular schools. No shortage of “how to” books claim to uncover the “secret” to getting into college.

The truth is that there is no blueprint or bona fide pathway to a specific place. Ultimately, the secret is that there is no secret, but there can be sanity- there can be unity.

Our guide is honest. It is based on a combined four decades of work in the field directly counseling and advising students and families in schools and communities. Using that experience, we outline why nobody can assure you a spot in selective colleges, and we describe how institutional priorities and school missions dictate decisions. Rather than laying out a *strategy* that can breed anxiety and exacerbate division, *The Truth about College Admission* debunks the myth that there is a script or a perfect formula for “standing out” or “getting in” and instead frames the discussion about the wider landscape of American higher education.

**Chapter 1:Why Are You Going to College?**

**PEOPLE LOVE THEIR KIDS**

Unfortunately, each year after decisions are released, admissions offices around the country get hundreds of phone calls and emails threatening lawsuits, pledging to write their alma mater out of their will, claiming bias and conspiracy, and informing us that we have ruined their vacation, winter holidays- or life altogether. How does that all feel? Terrible. But thankfully, we know where it comes from.

There is no question that the rising cost of college tuition, increasing debt loans, issues of mental health, and rapidly declining admit rates at our nation's most prestigious institutions are legitimate concerns and contribute to great consternation, speculation, and frustration. If there is one fundamental truth that we have come to appreciate in this work, it is this: people love their kids.

**EXPERIENCING ADMISSION**

Fundamentally, much of the anxiety about college admission comes down to the principal concept of economics- supply and demand. Phenomenally talented students from around the world are applying to a similar subset of schools with relatively fixed undergraduate student populations. That you cannot control. What you can control is your approach. You can improve your perspective. Ultimately, the decisions and conversations that your family should be most concerned with are the ones you make in the rooms you go into every day (your living room)- the ones you can control- not those made behind closed doors and college admission offices hundreds of miles away.

There are many high-priced educational consultants who will assure you that they can predict admission to certain schools. They will claim to polish and package essays or improve test scores to “guarantee” your admittance. This is a misguided use of your time, money, and hope- there is no formula to follow. Because this is the case, your goal and vision should not be the campus you will walk onto but *how* you will walk through this entire admission experience- together. Most people are focused on “getting in” to a particular school or a very small subset of schools. The image of success is not being able to wear a particular school’s sweatshirt or place a specific window decal on the back of the car. As you go through the college admission experience, your family's investment should be the same as the one you have always made- to supporting, encouraging, sharing, trusting, and lifting each other up.

**WHY IS YOUR CORNERSTONE**

You cannot answer “*Where* are you going to college?” until you first answer “*Why* are you going?” *Why* will lead you to *where.* “I’m looking at this university because they are excellent in the major I want to study,” or “because I can build a strong network there,” or “because going to school in that city will allow me to continue pursuing my passion for xyz while in college.”

Fundamentally, asking *why* is your cornerstone. It is your foundation for the entire college experience. *Why* must be asked first, because from it, *where* takes its direction. Asking *why* puts rankings into perspective. It puts the dollars on a return-investment chart into perspective.

We cannot help you diminish the number of people who will inevitably ask you *where*. But we can promise that question will be far less annoying if you have the confidence of knowing why certain schools are on your mind or on your college list. *Why* will lead you to *where*. Don't skip a step. Crawl before you walk. Lay that cornerstone first.

**Chapter 2: Remapping the Admission Landscape**

How many colleges and universities are there in the United States (including private, public, community colleges, two-year schools, four-year universities, technical, comprehensive, etc.)? About 4,600.

How many four-year colleges and universities are there in the United States? About 3,000.

How many four year colleges in the country admit less than one-third of applicants, that is, their admit rate is less than 33 percent (and they would be considered “selective” or “highly selective)? About 100

What does this mean for you? It means that getting into most colleges and universities around the country is not the real challenge for students who are doing well in high school. Instead it underscores the fact that there are hundreds of academically excellent and financially affordable colleges looking to admit and enroll talented students who will not only succeed inside the classroom but also contribute in a meaningful and influential way within the campus community.

**COLLEGE SEARCH: A TWO-WAY STREET**

The college admission process is a two-way street. That's right. You are not the only one searching for a good college match. Universities are doing this too. In fact, there is an entire industry around “search”- because it is big business.

Here is how this works. When you register for standardized tests, including the PSAT, SAT, ACT, and SAT Subject Tests, and AP Tests, there is an option for you to check a box indicating your willingness to share your information with universities.

Colleges and universities contract with the College Board or ACT to access databases and purchase names and contact information. This allows them to build what are known as “search campaigns” to identify high school students who seem to be good matches. They are able to segment their search for an incredible number of factors.

**Chapter 3: Wedges of College Admission**

In this chapter, we identify the primary wedges that divide families and provide you with tools and approaches to help keep you on the same page.

**WEDGE #1: TIME**

If you are not intentional about when you have conversations about searching for, applying to, and ultimately deciding on a college, the subject can bleed into almost any discussion.

The reason your parents are bringing up college, asking you questions, and expressing their opinions is partly because they are not convinced you are on it. If you answer their questions, show you have a plan, and demonstrate that you are making progress on setting up campus visits or completing applications and paying attention to deadlines, you will dramatically diminish the seemingly incessant nagging. In truth, it is not really nagging at all. Instead, it is simply them doing what they have always done- loving you by trying to lookout for you.

**WEDGE #2: COMMUNICATION**

For students and parents, we strongly encourage you to limit what you broadcast in conversation and post on social media. Volunteering where you are applying on your first-choice college opens you up to questions later from teachers, relatives, friends, and friends of friends about admission decisions and personal considerations regarding your ultimate college choice.

We would also challenge you not to ask other parents about their family’s college admission search. Likely the information shared is exaggerated or inaccurate. Typically, it only makes you- and by extension your family- more anxious. Instead of interrogating other parents in the middle of the experience, we encourage you to talk to parents who have been through this before. They have tremendous perspective to share and encouragement to provide. (we also guarantee you that none of them will say they wish they had made their college admission experience more public.)

**WEDGE #3: MONEY**

**UNDERSTANDING COSTS**

Colleges and universities that receive federal funding must publish their schools *total cost of attendance* (COA), which includes not only tuition, room and board, but also averages for fees, books, supplies, transportation, and personal expenses. Families often overestimate what they will ultimately pay to attend a particular school. One of the primary reasons is that simply looking at tuition, room, and board does not tell the whole picture. Published college sticker prices, which few students pay, and media attention to high-cost private colleges and universities may contribute to a students’ and families’ common misapprehensions about the price of attendance.

**NET PRICE**

John Leach, assistant vice provost for enrollment and director of financial aid at Emory University, implores families to use the Net Price Calculator, which the US Department of Education requires each school to make available on their institution's financial aid website. The *net price* is the amount you can expect to pay after receiving financial aid. “Use those net price calculators *as soon as you start thinking about college*,” Leach advises. He explains that by entering basic information into this resource, you will be able to get a “very good sense” of what families at that school who have similar savings, earnings, assets, and financial situations to yours have paid in recent years. “It is not perfect,” he adds, “but if you will take the time to put in accurate and thorough data, you can get an excellent idea of overall cost within an hour.”

**MONEY TALKS**

“When parents initiate conversations about finances early, students deeply value that respect and are way more aware, responsible, and interested in making college choices that make fun financial sense,” says Ron Diaz, director of student awards, Stanford University. Conversely, anxiety and frustration are born out of a lack of knowledge, and the money wedge is driven deep when parents are unwilling to have a “cards-on-the-table discussion about finances.

Any admission or financial aid director can share countless painful stories about families in April of senior year who come to their office in tears. Having received their financial aid package, the reality of paying for college is upon them, and in most of these cases, they have not had earnest conversations along the way. Now, after the student has been offered admission, bought the college hoodie, and changed all social media profile pictures to indicate intent to attend, financial lines are being drawn and emotions are running high on all sides.

The money wedge is real but avoidable. We encourage you to sit down as a family at some point in the students junior year and have an initial discussion about your finances. While you do not need to itemize all of your finances, we encourage you to provide perspective on your financial situation and how it relates to paying for college by covering some of these topics:

* monthly or annual earnings
* taxes
* fixed/consistent costs (mortgage, insurance, car payment, utilities, groceries, tuition if attending a private high school, organizational membership fees, donations)
* savings (retirement, future purchases, health-related expenses, and college costs)
* lifestyle (a second home, vacations, entertainment, eating out, trips to visit family and friends).

Having a personal discussion around taxes and monthly expenses helps frame their understanding in a completely new way. Most students have no idea how much an average monthly mortgage payment costs and have given no real thought to how their college tuition compares to your home value and financial obligations.

You should have a ballpark idea of how much your family can pay annually excluding any student loans. However, there is a fundamental difference between the ability to pay and the willingness to pay. This is where the conversations can get very emotional if you do not intentionally discuss limitations, conditions, expectations, and loan tolerance.

**LIMITATIONS**

What are you willing to pay for? Particularly in states with strong public university systems, we often hear parents say, “I am willing to pay for any of our state schools or the equivalent price, if my daughter chooses to go to an out-of-state public or private school.” Parents should consider and honestly discuss what limitations they want to establish. We are not suggesting that this keep you from visiting or applying to a school that looks like it will cost more than your determined threshold, but setting these limitations during junior year will keep you from feeling “got punched” in April of your senior year when financial aid packages show up.

**CONDITIONS**

If you can talk about why you are putting conditions in place, they will not come across as irrational or arbitrary but rather as helpful, instructive, and ultimately rooted in concern and love.

**EXPECTATIONS**

What role will/should students have in paying for their own college education? Even if your family is fortunate enough to be able to pay all costs, is there an expectation that students will contribute a certain amount each year? Setting clear expectations before you apply allows students to consider how they can work and save money during high school, as well as ask colleges they are interested in attending about opportunities for on-campus jobs or the prospects for- and salaries associated with- internships or co-ops while in college. Setting expectations will serve to further unify your family because “the problem” of paying for college becomes a joint effort- one to solve and resolve together.

**LOANS**

Currently, the average student loan debt nationally is approximately $30,000. With an average starting salary of approximately $50,000 for four-year graduates, you should be asking questions around your comfort level for incurring loans on an annual basis during college, as well as what repaying loans at $300-$400 per month will look like after graduation. Parents, this is an incredible opportunity to discuss your philosophy on, experience with, or personal observations of the risk and benefits associated with taking loans. What is your annual or cumulative student loan tolerance?

**WEDGE #4: EGO**

We know this is much easier said than done but for the sake of your family’s relationships, we are urging you to put your ego in a box during your admission experience. When letters inviting you to tour campuses or attend an information session in your hometown arrive or brochures show up in your mailbox from schools you think are not “as good” as where you are hoping to attend, check your ego. Have the confidence to think for yourself. Be willing to consider places nobody in your family or school has gone before. Come back to your *why* and let that, rather than the noise around you, guide your opinions and approach.

**Chapter 4: Creating a College List**

**FIRST THINGS FIRST**

The stress and anxiety people describe when they discuss college admission centers on the piece of the experience that you do not control- where and when you will be admitted and how much money that school will give you to attend. It is easy to forget that you control two-thirds of your college admission experience: where you visit and apply, and ultimately which school you select to attend.

It is important to add another important building block to your firmly established foundation stone- matching your *whys* with *wheres* in order to create a logical list of colleges to visit and apply to.

Keep an open mind as you explore different options, your list will be continually changing. Do not be disconcerted. This is precisely what you want.

**FRESHMAN AND SOPHOMORE YEAR**

We are often asked, “What should I (or what should my student) be doing in ninth and tenth grades for college?” The short answer is, “not much.”

At this point, your job is to be a good high school student. Take classes that interest, challenge, and prepare you.

Early in high school, we recommend simply getting on college campuses either close to home or while traveling on a family trip. Make an effort to see the campus of a big public state university, a small liberal arts college, or a technical or art institute if you are interested in those fields. Walk around, watch the students, suddenly eavesdrop on conversations, catch a game, wander through buildings, eat in the dining hall or food court or at a popular restaurant on the edge of campus. Get a feel for the size of different colleges and how they connect with the surrounding community. Again, ask simple questions: What stands out? What do I like here? What would I not enjoy if I were here? Your answers are hugely important because they point you toward the qualities you will be looking for in the future.

**BEGIN WITH THE BASICS**

*Location*: Ultimately, your goal is to find a college where you are excited and confident about becoming part of that community. This starts with figuring out the type of setting (rural, suburban, small town, urban area), culture, or part of your state or the country that you are naturally drawn to.

Consider some helpful questions like these: do you need or want to be able to drive home often and quickly, or are the cost and limitations of flying back OK? What types of restaurants, activities, or cultural events do you want to have access to on a regular basis?

*Size:* Are you more comfortable with a smaller college or fewer than 2,000 students or would knowing everyone in your class by graduation seem confining? If your high schools graduating class is 50-100 students, your perception of what a large college is will likely be different from a friend whose high school has close to 3,000 students. On many campuses, you will need to take a bus or shuttle between classes. Are you comfortable with that, or do you want a more intimate and compact campus where everything is walkable?

*Majors/programs*: If you are undecided on your major (like most applicants), you may want to explore colleges that allow or require you to explore broadly among disciplines. Given that well over half of undergraduate students change their major at least once, you should also find out what each colleges policy is on switching majors. Practices vary widely. Some schools allow students to change programs without any limitations. Others require you to apply to specific majors after a year or two on campus. Some colleges have GPA requirements or other internal transfer processes for their current students to change from one major to another.

*People:* Who do you want to be surrounded by for the next four-plus years? Remember that a big part of going to college is creating a network of friends and colleagues. Who are your people, your tribe, the types of individuals that bring out your best? These answers are hugely important to finding your best college matches. Do you want a school that is known for student activism, conservatism, or community engagement? College brochures may all look the same, but campus cultures vary widely.

*Outside the classroom*: What are you excited about beyond academics in college? What do you want your college experience to look like in the times and spaces between the classes?

*Cost*: A college’s cost should not keep you from visiting or applying, but you must understand the amount of financial aid you will need to make that place affordable to attend. We sincerely hope that you will consider our advice and have open discussions about earnings, expenses, savings, and how college costs factor into your family's overall financial situation, lifestyle, and goals.

*Selectivity*: If you honestly ask and answer the questions we have outlined, you will find many colleges (with widely varying selectivity) that match your criteria. You want to have a few colleges on your list where your grades and test scores put you above their average accepted student profile. There is nothing wrong with including a few schools with single-digit admit rates. However, if those colleges constitute your entire list, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Again, your job is to keep an open mind- a mix of idealism and realism.

*Research*: College Board, Princeton Review, College Data, College View, College Raptor, UNIGO, and others all provide free online interactive tools that allow you to enter and modify key components (size, location, cost, academic and nonacademic programs) to discover and compare colleges. Your high school may also have a college search and application management platform like Naviance. If you are staying open in your approach, we expect you will easily identify 20 schools that closely align with your criteria.

*Visit*: We understand that traveling to campuses is a big investment of both time and money. If you are unable to physically get to some of the places that interest you, check out the virtual tours that schools produce and present on their websites. YouVisit and CampusTours are among several companies that also partner with colleges to show pictures, videos, student testimonials, and online campus tour information that can be helpful resources.

*Show up*: Colleges’ admission representatives travel extensively in the fall, and increasingly in the spring, to meet students and build excitement for their college. Keep an eye out for college fairs in your area. College fairs are a great way to gather information, network, and learn about schools you have not yet considered. Do not waste this opportunity. It will be crowded, and your time with each college will be limited. Be prepared with two or three questions to which you could not easily find answers on their website. When colleges come to your high school, make every effort to attend. Do not just passively receive information. Use that time to connect with the admission officer (typically the same person who will be reading your application).

*Apply*: our advice is to arrive at a final list of colleges that is between five and nine schools that ideally answer your *why.* We advise you to breakdown your final list as follows:

* 2-3 “reach” schools- colleges where your grades and scores put you below their average admitted-student profile.
* 3-4 “target” schools- colleges where your profile aligns with their average admitted student
* 1-2 “likely” schools- colleges where you are well above the average admitted-student profile. (While you may hear the term “safety” school, there really is no such thing.)

**Chapter 5: The College Visit**

**WHY VISIT**

While websites, videos, social media, and virtual tours can be helpful, there is simply no substitute for visiting campus and getting a sense of the school, its programs, and its community. It is also an important way to demonstrate to an admission office that you are sincerely interested. Increasingly, institutions are using “demonstrated interest” as one criterion and their review of candidates. Admission professionals want to know that applicants have done their research and are applying because they are informed and therefore more likely to enroll if an offer of admission is extended. Visiting campus is one of the best ways to do this.

The ideal is to visit colleges when school is in session and students are on campus. A week day tour and information session and/or interview will provide the best feel for the campus, culture, and community.

**HOW TO VISIT**

Most colleges have an “visit” link on their website that outlines the different opportunities to get to know their institution. Usually you can book visits online or with a simple phone call. If a school allows you to sit in on a class, we highly recommend you take advantage of this opportunity- the more ways to experience college life at each school, the better. Do not attempt more than two visits in a day, and more than five or six visits in a week will likely leave your head spinning.

**CRITICAL QUESTIONS**

Asking the right questions, and being persistent in asking, is a fundamental life lesson. As you go through the college admission experience, this is absolutely vital. Our hope is that when you visit college campuses, you will commit to being a relentless inquirer. *What makes this college different from other schools*? This question is essential. If a student, tour guide, admission counselor, or faculty member cannot answer that question, run! One of the most challenging parts about the college admission experience is discerning how one school stands out from the other 4,000 in the country.

Here are a few other ways we suggest you use your time on campus to maximize your visit:

1. Develop a list of questions that you want answered at each school about academic programs, as well as outside the classroom. Some areas about which to inquire might be internships, career counseling, first-year retention, social life, safety, travel abroad programs, or other areas of interest/concern.
2. Try to connect with the admission representative who is responsible for your high school or the area where you live. If that individual is not available, ask for their contact information/business card.
3. Allow ample time to wander the campus after you leave the admission office.
4. Ask the admission office if you can have lunch in the dining hall.
5. Try to find a random student (not a tour guide) and ask their thoughts on the college, accessibility of professors, school spirit, support structures (tutoring, writing centers, career resources, etc.), and what it is like to live in the area.
6. Stop by the academic department of a discipline in which you have interest to talk with a professor and/or student.
7. Contact coaches, music directors, and others beforehand to set up meetings while you are on campus.
8. Pick up the student newspaper, as it generally offers an uncensored take on the issues facing students and the college as a whole.
9. At the end of your visit, ask yourself what story each college was trying to tell through the tour and information session. Is this consistent with what you value and the experience you seek?

**Chapter 6: Admission Factors I**

**What Are Colleges Looking for Academically?**

There are a handful of colleges and universities that require students to use their *institution-specific application* because they want to have more control over the development and implementation of the information they collect from candidates.

The Common Application, established by 15 private colleges in 1975, has grown to an association of over 800 member colleges and universities, both public and private, in the United States and around the world who have collaborated to provide one universal undergraduate application for admission. Students can fill out a single application online and send it (typically for a fee) to as many schools as they wish. Many of the member schools also have supplemental questions or essays that accompany the Common Application, and those that offer their own institutional application must agree to give equal consideration regardless of how a student chooses to apply.

If all of your colleges use a particular application, we recommend you save your time and energy and go with that one. You will need to be sure that you pay close attention to all institutional requirements beyond the standard application- that is, additional essays or other materials that are specific to each college.

If multiple applications do not sufficiently confound you, perhaps an array of deadlines will. Here is a primer on the most common options and deadlines.

**Rolling Admission**: Under this plan, students may apply at any time after the application is open (usually late summer after junior year or early fall of senior year). Many colleges that offer rolling admission will try to review applications and render a decision on a specific timeline (i.e., three weeks after submission). These colleges extend admission offers on a rolling basis until all spots are filled, at which time most schools will still accept applications for the waiting list.

**Early Decision (ED)**: This is a binding agreement through which a student can only apply to one school where they will commit to enrolling if admitted. A growing number of colleges and universities are now offering two rounds of early decision, the first usually in early November and the second in early January (allowing students denied at their first choice or who decide later to use this option). Most early decision 1 applicants are notified of a decision in mid-December, and early decision 2 applicants will learn of their decision in late February or March with the rest of the pool. There are even a few colleges that allow applicants to apply early decision on a rolling basis, meaning that at any time during the admission cycle an applicant can decide to enter into a binding agreement and consideration of their candidacy. Because admitted students are guaranteed to enroll generally speaking, the acceptance rate for early decision applicants is significantly higher. Increasingly many selective colleges and universities are enrolling nearly half their class under this plan.

**Early Action (EA)**: Like early decision, under early action admission plans, students usually submit applications in October or November and learn of their decisions in December or January. The main difference is that students are not bound to attend if accepted like with ED, and they can submit multiple EA applications simultaneously. While it varies from school to school, there is often a benefit of applying EA, because frequently colleges are taking larger percentages of their incoming class through this plan.

**Restrictive Early Action (REA)/ Single Choice Early Action (SCEA)**: OK, are you still with us? Remember how we just said that you can apply to multiple colleges through an EA plan? Well, there are a few schools that have developed a hybrid plan where students can apply and receive decisions truly under a nonbinding application, but in doing so they agree not to apply to another school under a binding ED plan at the same time.

**Regular Decision (RD)**: This is your standard, run-of-the-mill admission application with deadlines usually in early January or February and notification in late March.

**Priority Applications**: This can mean different things at different schools. At some colleges and universities, priority applications refer to an earlier deadline (often November 30 or December 1). By which a student can apply to be considered in the school's first round of review. This is often found at larger state systems like the University of California. Priority applications are also sometimes called VIP applications, “snap apps,” “fast apps,” and a range of other names and refer to streamlined applications that encourage students to apply early (and boost a colleges application numbers). Often application fees are waived and essays are not required.

**HOW COLLEGES REVIEW APPLICATIONS/ WHAT ARE COLLEGES LOOKING FOR?**

Depending on the size of a college, the number of applications they receive, and their institutional priorities, the admission office will take one of two approaches to reviewing your application.

**FORMULAIC ADMISSION REVIEW**

Formulaic review is typically found at public universities that have determined that academic factors alone are sufficient to evaluate and enroll students who will be successful at their institution. Formulaic admission is based on just that- formulas that use the courses you take and the grades you earn (GPA) in high school, along with your SAT/ACT scores to assign you an admission “score.” These processes are simple to understand because they are completely transparent. You are able to go directly to a school’s website or admission publications to find the exact high school courses, GPA expectations, and standardized test scores that you will need to be admitted.

**Holistic Admission Review**

Holistic admission is a blend of science (objective quantitative evidence) and art (subjective considerations such as character, special talents, etc.) As a result, they have developed additional criteria for review and comparison in order to build and shape the class they want to enroll at their institution.

After you submit your application, the admission team ensures that your file is complete by matching your transcript, letters of recommendation, test scores, and other supporting documents. Traditionally, the first person to read your application is the individual who travels to your area and is charged with recruiting in that region. Their job is to understand your school and community environment both inside and outside the classroom. After they read your application, they make a recommendation to admit, defer, deny, or wait-list. They then pass it along to a second reader who also reads your file in its entirety. Often the second reader is more seasoned and, if they agree with the initial recommendation, has the authority to make a final decision. However, in some cases, your application will be passed along for a broader committee to review, discuss, and decide.

As you visit colleges and speak with admission representatives, you will usually find that they are clear about the particular process they use for making their admission decisions (if not, be sure to ask). Now we are going to help you understand what they are looking for, what questions they are asking each other as they review your application, and what types of conversations they are having in those committee sessions.

**ACADEMIC COURSE CHOICE/RIGOR OF CURRICULUM**

The first question admission readers ask when they open your application is, “Where does this student go to school?” They want to understand what curriculum choices you have. Does your school offer an AP curriculum? What are the varying levels of rigorous curriculum in your school? To determine what you had access to in your school or community, they refer to the “school profile” that your high school counselor provides to accompany your transcript. If you have not seen this document, you can often find it on your schools website. For admission counselors, this is a goldmine of information and insight.

Regardless of what your school labels its courses, the admission counselors fundamental goal is to understand *what you could have taken and what you chose to take* during high school. When you visit colleges or hear admission counselors speak, you will continually hear them say that they want to see “that you have chosen to challenge yourself.” Often, however, they do not explain why.

Admissions readers want to see you chose rigorous courses in high school because it demonstrates your desire to push and stretch yourself. They see your choices, in a sense, as a character trait. Your preparation is also critical because college courses are challenging and professors want to know that you have had experience with the pace and depth at which they cover and discuss material.

In order to rate or evaluate the extent to which you have challenged yourself, some schools will literally count and record the number of “rigorous” courses (AP, dual-enrollment college courses, etc.) As determined by your school's profile. Others have developed an internal rubric that categorizes classes and allows readers to rate the strength of your curriculum choices.

**COURSE PERFORMANCE/GRADES/TRENDS**

In order to bring some level of standardization and comparison to their applicant pool, some colleges will recalculate your GPA based on their internal scale. This is a good question to ask when you visit.

Regardless of grading scales, recalculations, and weighted or unweighted GPA's, when it comes to assessing academic performance, college admission reviewers are asking and discussing a very simple question: “Has this student taken challenging classes and done well?”

The other fundamental consideration is, “How did the student progress through high school?” This concept is known as a grade trend-did a student increasingly earn higher grades in more difficult courses as they move through high school, or did they start out strong and then struggle academically? Admission reviewers are also taking note of anomalies- lower grades in a particular class, a dip in one academic semester, or other notable situations. The variety of reasons for those blips and recoveries vary widely, and you will have an opportunity to explain them in a section called “Special Circumstances” or “Additional Information.”

Here are some of the questions we repeatedly hear that you might be wondering yourself:

“Is it better for me to take the regular class and get an A or choose the advanced class and ‘risk’ a B?”

“Should my son take three or four AP courses to be competitive for admission?”

As with so many in college admission, the answer is, “it depends.” If you will be applying to engineering programs, a course program lacking in rigorous calculus or physics is a red flag in admission review.

You have just learned that context is everything for admission committees. They do not expect you to take every AP, honors, or advanced class that is offered at your high school. What they are looking for is intentional challenge in your course selection, so straight As without rigor suggests a lack of willingness to stretch yourself, a characteristic you now know colleges want to see.

**STANDARIZED TESTING- THE NOISE IN THE NUMBERS**

**Test Optional**: The first thing you need to know about standardized tests is that not all colleges require them. In 2018, the University of Chicago, Colby College, and the University of New England (among others) went test-score optional, joining an ever-growing list of schools (over 1,000) that have determined that they do not need test results to enroll a class that will succeed academically on their campus. Due to the noise in the numbers that many selective universities also experience, it is highly likely that the test-optional trend will only accelerate in the years ahead.

**ACT vs. SAT**: We often hear students speculate that colleges prefer one test over the other or want to see scores from both exams. Colleges, by and large, are test-score agnostic and put no additional emphasis or priority on one over the other. Admission committees are not debating or speculating about why you took a certain test.

For schools that do require standardized testing, like all factors in a holistic review process, they will be viewed, well … holistically. That means colleges do not rank which factor in their process carries the most weight, even though it is understandable that families frequently ask for that order. Think about it this way- testing probably matters a little more than most directors or deans typically admit but far less than most students or parents imagine. Colleges do not simply take your GPA at face value without considering course choice, school context, trends, and so forth.

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?**

Here is the reality: for some colleges and universities (especially many of the most selective) standardized tests are a necessary evil in college admission. While there are an increasing number of schools that no longer require testing as part of their review process, if you have your heart set on a college that still does, standardized testing is going to affect your candidacy. If your scores are well below a school’s testing profile/range, unless you have a significant “hook” (impact athlete or other institutional priority) your odds for admission are likely not good. Rather than feel confined or limited by these numbers, there are ways to take back control. For some, this could mean buying a book and taking countless practice tests. For others, it is as simple as an outline course or maybe just a daily email with a test question of the day. The options for a test preparation are as diverse and plentiful as there are testing styles, from peer or professional tutors to group classes to Khan Academy. Some students see significant gains over 100 points per section and others remain stagnant. The point is that you have to “play the game” if you are applying to an institution that values high scores.

When confronting standardized testing, it is also important for you to acknowledge when you have done all that you can and to know when it is time to accept your scores as they are. When your scores are not increasing between test dates despite the hours you are pouring into studying, at some point it becomes an unnecessary exercise in frustration. Determine the cost/benefit of the time and resources you are spending on readying yourself for this one exam and return to your *why*. You might need to revisit your college list to make sure your scores align with the colleges to which you are aspiring. Or perhaps you will need to focus on those test optional colleges

It is your responsibility as an applicant to know the requirements and policies of the colleges to which you are applying and to be proactive about scheduling the necessary testing to meet these needs.

**PRACTICAL TIPS FOR COMPLETIG YOUR APPLICATION**

The Common Application asks if you wish to “self-report” your test scores. If you are applying test optional to any of the schools on your list, simply respond no to self-reporting scores and then send official test scores from the College Board or ACT directly to the colleges that require them. If all of your colleges require standardized testing, it doesn't hurt to self-report your test scores on the application. In fact, increasingly colleges and universities are allowing students to share unofficial test scores with the understanding that if you are admitted and enroll, you will need to provide official scores. This saves applicants a lot of money and allows you to have more control over which scores the colleges receive.

**Chapter 7: Admission Factors II**

**What Are Colleges Looking for Outside the Classroom?**

**EXTRACURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT/IMPACT**

Colleges spend a good deal of their time in committee trying to understand not only what you have been involved with but also the contributions you have made in your community during high school. They want to know what your week/year looks like in combination with your academic life and coursework. The reason they care is because they are attempting to build a campus community that will advance the mission of their institution and enrich the experience of others on campus. In order to do that, these are the key questions reviewers are asking.

**WHAT IS THIS STUDENT *INVOLVED* WITH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM?**

When colleges are reviewing your extracurricular activities, they look at them not only as reflective of your interests but also of your values. They are far more concerned with understanding how you are using your time when you are not in school rather than judging your choices.

**WHAT IS THIS STUDENT *INVESTING* IN DURIGN HIGH SCHOOL?**

A pressure that students often feel is that they need to have “done at all” in order to appear “well rounded” to colleges. This is a big misconception. Do not forget- admissions committees are made up of people. They have families, they go on vacations, and they have dogs. Pursue what you love to do in and out of high school, and make that clear on your application.

**WHAT *IMPACT* HAS THIS STUDENT MADE?**

Colleges have broadened their definition of “leadership” from simply focusing on titles to asking about a student’s contributions. You can demonstrate impact through added responsibilities at jobs, helping raise three younger siblings at home, or serving as the primary translator for parents.

**HOW HAS THIS STUDENT *INFLUENCED* OTHERS?**

While scales and language differ from one university to the next, colleges will generally use rubrics to evaluate and rate your comparative longevity and commitment, as well as impact, investment, and influence.

**ESSAYS AND SHORT ANSWERS**

Here are some of the common questions readers consider when they rate your essay or comment on your writing:

* Did I gain new insight or understanding into the student’s life, motivations, values, character, or intentions?
* Do I see evidence of growth, maturity, or self-awareness?
* Is this piece compelling, unique, reflective?
* Would this voice add value to your campus culture?

How are admission readers arriving at their answers?

They *are* reading quickly. At schools receiving thousands or tens of thousands of applications, 30-50 applications per day is a very common review expectation. This means that your first line and first paragraph need to grab the reader's attention. Many reviewers will read the first line of each paragraph or the first and last paragraph of your essay to get a sense of your style and subject. In some cases that is enough for them to rate the quality of your writing and determine whether the topic you have selected provides them new insight.

They want to know what inspires and excites you. A wasted essay is one that only reiterates what they already know. Readers do not want an extended resume. They help committees make notes about your character, your motivations, and your mindset more than your accomplishments.

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?**

You can write and rewrite your college essay to death with multiple editors providing feedback as you try to get it just right. Ultimately, it is a test to see if you can get out of your head and open your heart. It is an exercise in exploring self-what makes you who you are, not who everyone thinks you should be. Who are you outside the constraints that are placed on you by school, parents, friends, and society? How do you demonstrate character in your own unique way?

Here are a few tips for writing an authentic, effective college essay:

*Ignore the prompts*. If an application provides multiple essay questions (like the Common Application), don't read them first, read yourself. Most conformists will stifle their unique voice by attempting to respond to a specific prompt that the application provides. What results is often a generic statement that lacks energy or personality. Write the story that you want to express and then choose the prompt with which it best aligns. If a college does ask you to respond to only one specific question or prompt, by all means follow directions- and do not exceed the word count.

*Jedi mind tricks*. The college essay is not a test to see if you can read minds or anticipate what the admission office wants to hear. Plain and simple, they want to know about you, how well you write, and how self-aware you are. Write the essay for you, not them.

*It's not us, it's you*. Regardless of the topic about which you choose to write, be sure the essay reveals more about you than the other characters or places in the story.

*Happily never after*. The moral to the college essay is that there need not be a moral. You are writing a personal narrative, not a parable, so don't feel compelled to conclude with a lesson learned or a happy ending. You are sharing your story, not a fairy tale.

*Always ask why*. When you have finished a draft of your essay, read it over and ask yourself why you wrote it. If you cannot answer this question, you might not be going deep enough or painting a vivid picture of who you are and what is important to you.

*Did your essay hit its mark*? Have you effectively communicated who you are and what you value?

*No shortcuts*. Reviewers do not want to read what you could (or did) write for another school. Increasingly, colleges are asking and they are short-answer questions or supplemental, school-specific portions of their applications, “Why us?” They want specifics. They want you to have done your homework. You should be spending time digging back through those brochures or websites or notes from their information session to give details on *why* that are related to specific professors, opportunities, or campus culture.

**Chapter 8: Admission Decisions**

**HANDLING THOSE ADMISSION DECISIONS**

Now it is time to understand the possible admission decision scenarios- and how to handle them.

**Defer**

Each year many students are “deferred” from the Early Action (EA) or Early Decision (ED) or to Regular Decision (RD). Essentially, this is a college's way of hedging their bets. They are going to admit the students who the admissions staff are 100 percent confident about wanting to enroll, deny the students that are 100 percent confident are not academically competitive or are not good matches for their institution, and then defer the rest. Want to get a sense of the strength and size of their entire applicant pool once regular decision applications are submitted and not overextended their offers early. It is common to see 20 to 40 percent of EA/ED applicants deferred to the next round.

**What Does This Mean for You?**

*It means you have some work to do*. You will need to send in your final fall grades. You may need to write an additional essay or submit a form telling the admission committee more about your senior-year extracurricular activities. Defer is a “hold on” or a “tell us more.” They will be looking at how you have done in a challenging senior schedule or if your upward grade trend will continue or if you can juggle more responsibility outside the classroom with your course load. Use the deferral to refocus and motivate you to finish your senior year well. It might even mean retaking standardized tests to try and score closer to their admitted-student profile.

*It means you may need to submit another application or two*. The good news is that many great schools have deadlines in January, after most EA/ED decisions are released. Bottom line- you need applications in at a few schools with higher admit rates and lower academic profiles than the one that deferred you.

*It means holistic review is a real thing*. Whether your scores and grades or above, below, or directly in the middle of their academic profile, a defer only proves what you already knew- admission is about more than numbers. Institutional priorities, shaping a class, and supply and demand drive admission decisions.

*It means you need to check your ego and wait*. We told you college admission was not designed to be fair- now you are living that reality. Unfortunately, defer means spending a few more months in limbo. The committee has decided they want to evaluate you in the context of their overall pool. Do not let your ego get in your way. Too many students do not send in fall grades, complete the deferred form, or send other information schools ask for because their pride is shaken.

**Wait List**

Otherwise known as admission purgatory, there is no other way to say it- the wait list sucks. You have already waited for a decision (sometimes having already been deferred), and now you are being asked to wait again.

**Why Do Schools Have a Wait List?**

It depends whom you ask. Deans, directors, and other enrollment managers will say it is because predicting 17-year-old behavior is not an exact science. Parents and students will say it is because enrollment people are not that smart or maybe even a little cruel.

**What Does This Mean for You?**

*It means you need to accept your spot*. At most schools the wait list decision is actually an offer. Check what they send you, and read their website closely. Typically, you need to take action of some kind to accept or claim your wait list spot. Alternatively, you can decide to close or cancel your application for continued consideration.

*It means you need to deposit at another college*. You should assume that you will not be pulled from the wait list and begin to get excited about the school that accepted you and where you have chosen to deposit.

*It means you should reach out to your admission counselor* (unless they specifically tell you not to). If you have met or corresponded with someone from the admission office, perhaps when they visited your high school or while you were on their campus, send them an email. Let them know you claimed your spot on the wait list and completed the schools stipulated form or essay. You are indicating continued interest in attending. Wait list activity is all about shaping a class- and you want to be at the top of their mind.

*It means you need to wait well*. Waiting is not easy. Uncertainty is frustrating and unsettling. We do not have a solution for that. What we can tell you is that life is full of situations like this. Do not let being in limbo keep you from enjoying the last part of your senior year. Have fun on spring break. Go to prom. Take the opportunity to thank your teachers or read something outside of school in which you are genuinely interested.

**Deny**

As a strong student and an achiever, this very well may be one of the first “no’s” you have heard. It is never easy or fun. We were both denied by colleges. We have had girlfriends break up with us. We have been turned down for jobs. Your goal is to look at a deny not as a hard stop but rather as a pivot.

**What Does This Mean for You?**

*It means you will be OK*. When you are denied admission, you need to remember that no college (or person or job or car or city) is perfect. Perfect colleges do not exist- a perfect mentality does.

**Admit**

*It means you are going to have a decision to make*. By the May 1 National Candidate Reply Deadline you will need to put down your enrollment deposit at only one school.

**Chapter 9: Making Your College Choice**

**YOU GET TO DO THIS**

Unless you apply under a binding decision plan, you will have until the National Candidate Reply Deadline of May 1 to make your final choice. If you are admitted early decision, you will need to close any outstanding applications. We recommend you do this immediately so that the other schools to which you have applied do not waste their time considering your application. It also means less emails for you and possibly creating an opportunity for a classmate.

For most students, however, the spring is about weighing options, comparing choices, and considering offers.

**WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM COLLEGES**

Phone calls (to every number listed on your application), emails, text, letters, owls, invitations, and random alumni knocking at your door. Communication and marketing go into overdrive once you are admitted. The more students colleges can convert to deposits from their admitted pool, the fewer they will need to pull from the wait list. From a rankings and prestige standpoint, that is to their advantage because it keeps their admit rate lower and increases their yield rate.

They are going to invite you to admitted-student days or open houses. During these programs, you can count on hearing from amazing students, top faculty, successful alumni, and either the president or another high-level administrator. Generally, smaller schools will provide you the opportunity to interact with current students, visit a class, eat in a dining hall, tour campus, as well as explore your area of academic interest, and see a first-year residence hall. Larger, public universities may not be able to craft as personalized of an experience, but they're admitted student programs frequently allot time for you to speak with representatives from advising, housing, dining, orientation, and other critical first-year support offices at tables during a fair-like portion of the day.

**RUN THE NUMBERS**

Reexamine starting salaries of students from the schools you have been admitted to- specifically in the major you plan to study. Look closely at the average debt load and repayment timeline of graduates. Explore the number of employers that come to campus to hire current students for internships or co-ops and that recruit graduating students for jobs.

When you receive financial aid packages, be diligent about comparing them to one another. We highly recommend you create a spreadsheet specifically for this purpose. What does each school expect you to pay back (loans)? How much are they giving you in merit-or-need-based scholarship that you will not need to pay back? Is the award renewable or only good for one year? Does your aid package include an assumption that you will have an on-campus job?

Generally, you will have all of these financial aid packages by the last week of March or first week of April at the latest. This still gives you nearly a month to make a final choice. Do not be in a rush. Frequently, families do not completely understand their financial aid awards (and then unfortunately they are all different in format and terminology), So do not hesitate to call the financial aid office to speak directly with a representative about your specific package and the implications for you both as a student and a graduate. While you are on the call, or if you visit in person, be sure to ask about subsequent years. Are there departmental grants or scholarships that you may qualify for after your first year?

**TRUST YOUR GUT**

Ultimately, only you can make this decision. Be confident and trust your gut. This is the first of many times you will experience these types of choices: relationships, jobs, graduate school, or moving to a new city or state or country. Sometimes, the hardest part about being talented- the most difficult part about having options- is that there really is not a definitively *right* answer.