

Strategies for Applying to Highly Selective Colleges

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Purpose of this talk

- My goal to give you some advice if you wish to explore admission to selective or highly selective colleges. Some of this advice will be useful later when you apply to your first job.
- Applying to college is neither complicated nor arcane.
- My goal is to summarize the main points that expensive college coaches convey to their clients in about an hour.



“Highly Selective” Colleges?

- Barron’s rates all colleges and universities on an eight point scale based on their selectivity with “1” being the most selective and “8” being the least.
- Barron’s rates 90 schools (1) as “most competitive” which I refer to as “Highly Selective”. These are similar to the top 45 on each of the US News Rankings for National Universities and Liberal Arts Colleges.
 - <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/04/what-makes-a-college-selective-and-why-it-matters/>
 - <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/04/04/business/economy/economix-selectivity-table.html>
- 100 schools are “highly competitive” (2, 2+). GPA: B to B+, SAT 620-650
- Out of 2200 four year colleges in the US, 1100 are “Not Competitive.”
- Selective Public Schools: University of Virginia (1), UCLA (1), UF (2+)
- Selective Private Schools: Harvard(1), Stanford(1), Amherst(1) and Williams (1).



Selective or Highly Selective Colleges in Florida and in the Southeast US

Florida Schools	Southeastern Schools
University of Miami (1)	Duke (1)
New College (2+)	Emory (1)
University of Florida (2+)	University of North Carolina (1)
Rollins College (2)	Georgia Institute of Technology (1)
Florida State University (2)	University of Virginia (1)
Stetson College (3+)	Wake Forest University (1)
University of Central Florida (3+)	Vanderbilt University (1)
Florida Institute of Technology (3)	Tulane University (1)
Flagler College (3)	University of Richmond (1)
	College of William and Mary (1)
	Washington and Lee University (1)



Why Consider a Highly Selective College?

I will give you four reasons:

- **Higher Lifetime Income:** Since the 1960's students who attend highly selective colleges can expect to earn more during their lifetimes than those attending less selective schools and **the difference is growing**. In 1982, the increase in lifetime earnings was 65% or \$1.2 million. For current graduates, the increase in lifetime earnings is estimated to be over \$3 million.
- **Lower Cost (for low income students):** In most cases, the increase in tuition is returned in less than 3 years even in the absence of financial aid. For students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, highly selective schools are often **cheaper** (and sometimes **free**) due to generous financial aid.

- » "The Return to Attending a Highly Selective College", by Caroline Hoxby
- » <http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/why-students-want-to-go-to-harvard/28613>
- » <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ffp0002.pdf>
- » <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ffp0002s.pdf>



Are there non-economic reasons to attend Highly Selective Colleges?

Absolutely!

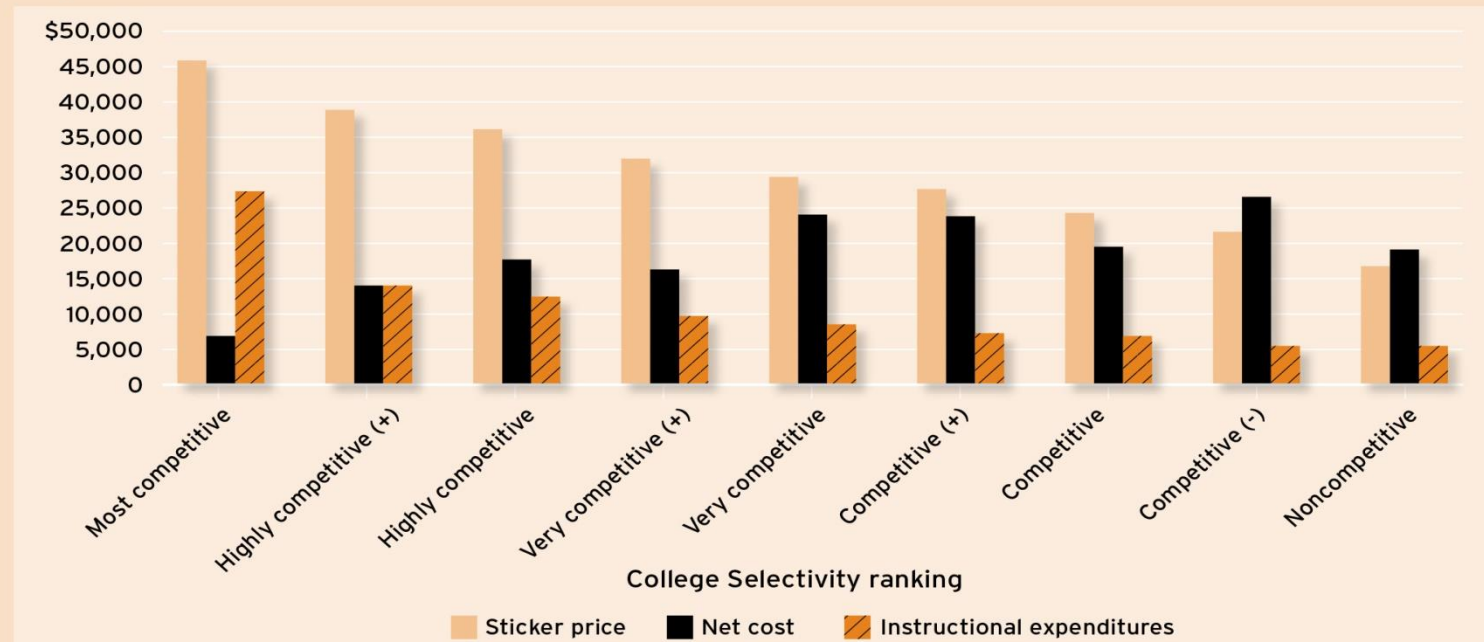
- **Broaden Your Life Experience**– Most Highly Selective Schools design their classes around a concept of multi-level diversity (more on this later). You will be exposed to **new ideas, and new cultures**. You don't learn about new ideas and new people by avoiding them.
- **Develop your skills** – Olympic athletes develop their skills by training with other Olympic athletes. World class intellectuals develop their minds by pursuing their education with similarly talented intellectuals.



Highly Selective Colleges have a Higher Sticker Price but Lower Actual Cost for Low Income Families

A Better Deal (Figure 1)

For students from low-income families, attending a more-competitive college often costs much less than attending a less-competitive school.



NOTE: Sticker price and net cost include tuition, fees, and room and board. Net cost is calculated for students at the 20th percentile of family income.

SOURCES: Author's calculations from the Integrated Postsecondary Data System and college net-cost calculators for the 2009-10 school year. College selectivity is based on Barron's Profiles of American Colleges (2009).



Who applies to Highly Selective Colleges?

- Only 34% of low income, high achieving high school applicants attend highly selective colleges as compared to 78% of high income, high achieving applicants.
 - **Similar college graduation rates** from highly selective colleges.
 - Highly selective schools are usually **less expensive** for low income students than less selective colleges when financial aid is considered.
 - Low income students **did not have access to the information** about these schools. (College Boot Camp hopes to address this problem.)
 - <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18586>,
 - <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/3/25/admissions-study-low-income/>,
 - http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/jan-june13/eliteschools_03-27.html



Why Would Graduates of Highly Selective Colleges Earn More?

- Why do graduates of attend highly selective schools earn more?
 - On average, they more talented and motivated than those at less challenging programs.
 - Their talents are more fully developed at the more challenging programs.
 - Those developed talents are more recognizable to employers after graduation.



Why Would Graduates of Highly Selective Colleges Earn More?

So, if the accepted students are better, wouldn't they just achieve more no matter where they go to school?

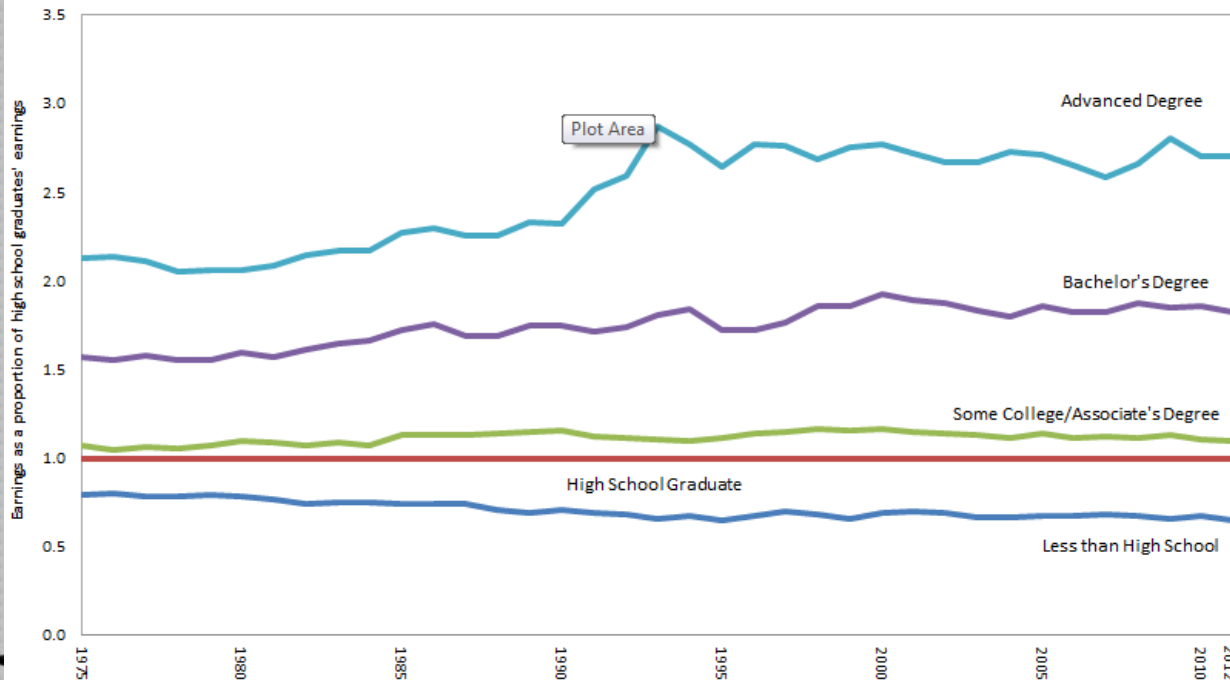
- **Affluent students** who were accepted to highly selective schools but chose to attend less selective schools often *did* do just as well income-wise.
<http://www.nber.org/papers/w7322>.
- However, **low income students** earned higher incomes only by actually attending the highly selective schools.
- All of this is independent of college major. Undergraduate majors with highest post graduate income: **Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)**



Annual Median Household Income by Educational Attainment

US Census Bureau

Figure 10: Average Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers as a Proportion of the Average Earnings of High School Graduates by Educational Attainment: 1975 - 2012



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau. 1975-2002 March Current Population Survey, 2003-2013 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey.



Synthetic Work-Life Earnings by Educational Attainment

Educational attainment	Synthetic work-life earnings
None to 8th grade.	936,000
9th to 12th grade.	1,099,000
High school graduate.	1,371,000
Some college.	1,632,000
Associate's degree .	1,813,000
Bachelor's degree.	2,422,000
Master's degree.	2,834,000
Professional degree.	4,159,000
Doctorate degree.	3,525,000



What advice do we have for students prior to senior year of high school?

Freshman to Junior Year:

- Don't try to "pump" the GPA by taking the easiest classes! Take challenging courses and perform well as long as you can handle the course load and perform well.
- Participate!
 - Community Service is a must!
 - Clubs, Sports, Arts, Volunteering, Fundraising
 - Quality beats Quantity every time
 - Did you have a leadership position?
 - Were you a founder?
 - Did you demonstrate creativity or initiative?



What advice do we have for students prior to senior year of high school?

Junior Year:

- Review SAT/ACT/AP/IB and language requirements of a tentative list of schools. (For example, some schools require subject tests, some don't.)
- Take the SAT/ACT in the spring of your Junior Year:
 - Allows for a retake if your performance was affected by illness or family/personal crisis.
 - Allows you to apply early action, early decision or rolling admission with much better acceptance rates.
 - Allows you to gauge your level of competitiveness and create a tentative list of colleges.
- Review the list with your parents and guidance counselors and divide the schools into three categories: “Dream”, “Reach” and “Backup”.



Common Application

- The Common Application (over 500 schools)- requires colleges to use both **objective** and **subjective** criteria - excludes many public schools which use only objective criteria.
- They now have schools from 47 states as well as eleven foreign countries.



“Most Selective” Public Universities (outside Florida)

- Examples: UVA (1), UNC (1), Michigan (2), UCLA (1), UC Berkley (1), College of William and Mary (1)
- Be aware,
 - Out of state admission is usually more difficult than in state.
 - Out of state tuition is often tripled...the total cost is close to that of private schools.
 - Many schools use out of state student tuition to fund their programs.
 - Getting financial aid may be difficult. UVA and the College of William and Mary are very open about this and accept up to 30% out of state to fund their programs.
- However, these are excellent schools and if you have a family connection, if you are attracted to specific academic programs or a school’s location, by all means apply!



College Expenses

- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) – Your parents absolutely must fill this out. Some money is awarded on a first come, first served basis starting Jan 1 until it “runs out”. Do not procrastinate!
 - Multiple websites give parents advice on filling FAFSA forms.
- Financial Aid calculators on school websites
- Many top private colleges have eliminated student loans from financial aid calculations



College Expenses

- **Scholly: Scholarship Search**, app on iTunes/Android
 - \$0.99 app which hooks you up with scholarship opportunities as diverse as “Dr. Pepper Tuition Giveaway”, “Ayn Rand Essay Competition” and many others. Often you will submit an essay to compete for this money. Some students have applied for dozens of these opportunities.



College Expenses

- **Questbridge.org**

- QuestBridge is a program for “high-achieving low-income students.” Full tuition, room, board, no parental contribution. 36 top tier schools. Early deadline. Optional match. Family income < \$60K.
- Amherst College, Rice University, Bowdoin College, Scripps College, Brown University, Stanford University, Caltech, Swarthmore College, Carleton College, Trinity College, Colby College, Tufts University, Colorado College, University of Chicago, Columbia University, University of Notre Dame, Dartmouth College, University of Pennsylvania, Davidson College, University of Southern California, Emory University, University of Virginia, Grinnell College, Vanderbilt University, Haverford College, Vassar College, MIT, Washington and Lee University, Northwestern University, Wellesley College, Oberlin College, Wesleyan University, Pomona College, Williams College, Princeton University, Yale University



College Expenses

- Don't be afraid to apply and see what they offer in financial assistance, if you are accepted.
- Many highly selective schools make their admissions decisions in a “need blind” manner.
- There are many more “merit scholarships” today. Highly Selective Schools are using these to attract high achieving students in competition with other schools.



Application Fees

- Usually, the fees are between \$50 and \$75 per application.
- Many schools will waive application fees for applicants with more modest family incomes. Many schools, over 300, have no application fees.
 - Bryn Mawr(1), Carleton(1), Case Western Reserve(1), Grinnell(2), Mount Holyoke(2+), Oberlin(1), US Naval and Military Academies(1), Wellesley(1), Colby(1), Smith(1), Denison(2+), Reed(1), Tulane(1)
- Some schools charge more: Stanford (1) \$90, Columbia (1) \$85, Duke(1) \$85, Dartmouth (1) \$80. UNC (1) \$80,
- Emory(1) \$75, Harvard (1) \$75, **UF(2+) \$30, FSU(2) \$30**, University of Miami(1) \$70.



What drives admissions decisions at highly selective schools?

- Top tier schools believe that the best educational experience for all students comes from admitting a diverse, multitalented student body. And they are willing to pay for this through generous financial aid programs.
- Example: 70% of Harvard students receive financial aid. The average cost per financial aid student is \$12,000/yr. Harvard is more affordable than a state school for 90% of families. All other top schools have generous financial aid packages, as well.



Multilevel Diversity

- Geographic **diversity** – It is “easier” to get into Harvard from Montana than from Massachusetts.
- Racial/Ethnic/Socioeconomic
- Academic **diversity**. Schools need students interested in math, science, psychology, philosophy, language and literature.
- Non-academic **diversity**. Do you engage in sports, drama, music etc?



Sports, Performing Arts

- Note: If you are a good student and play sports well at the varsity level (or you perform in music or drama), and you believe that you can compete at the collegiate level, contact (or have your coach contact) the school of your choice early.
- Be ready to provide video.



Legacy

- Most highly selective schools give extra consideration to legacy applicants. Therefore, look at schools attended by parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, even grandparents.
- These schools have promoted **social diversity** for more than 50 years. As a result, their alumni are ethnically and racially diverse. Alumni contribute heavily to their financial aid programs which allow many low income students to attend.
- How much does it help?
 - “You have to make it to the fence on your own, but once there, we’ll help you get over.” – Yale Admissions Director



Types of Admission

- Regular Action (RA)
 - Application deadlines vary but usually due on January 1, admissions decisions by April 1
 - Acceptance of admission by May 1.



Types of Admission

- Early Decision (ED)
 - This means that if you are accepted, you commit to attend.
 - Usually, you complete your application by Nov 1 and get a decision by Dec 15. You may apply to only one ED school.
 - If you are fortunate enough to be accepted to an ED school, you should withdraw your application from all other schools. This will enhance the chance of a fellow classmate to gain acceptance. Also, if another school holds a spot for you they may have to take someone off the waiting list which creates a cascade of acceptances and potential loss of deposits.
 - EXCEPTION: You are waiting to hear about financial aid.



Types of Admission

- Early Action (EA)
 - This means that you get an early acceptance decision but are not bound to attend. You can defer your answer until May 1 to see what other schools decide.
 - Usually, there is a Nov 1 deadline and Dec 15 decision.
 - “Restrictive Early Action”, like Boston College (1) or Harvard (1) means you may not apply to an ED school or another EA school.
 - If you are accepted and you decide to attend, withdraw your applications from all other schools for the same reasons expressed earlier, unless you are waiting to hear about financial aid.



Types of Admissions

- Rolling Admissions (Rolling)
 - This means that you can get a decision within 4-6 weeks of application completion. It is usually (but not always) nonbinding.
 - Some schools combine “Rolling” with “ED”, e.g. Wake Forest (1). One student completed her application on July 8 and was accepted (and committed) on August 12 **before** she started her last year of high school. A real “no stress” senior year!



Strategy – Should you apply EA or ED?

- For some schools, the standards for acceptance are the same for ED or EA. For some, it is easier. It is difficult to simply compare acceptance rates since the applicant pools differ. However,
 - Amherst (1) accepted 14% overall and 39% early
 - University of Pennsylvania (1) accepted 10% overall and 24% early
 - Bucknell (1) accepted 27% regular and 62% early
- All schools worry about their “**yield**”, the percentage of admitted students who attend. For most highly selective schools, this percentage is 25%-80%. ED students do not count against the yield (they *raise* it) so a school can secure good students *and* raise its yield in this way.
- As colleges fill up their classes, they can get a bit more “picky” about late applications and it becomes more difficult to get in.



Why don't more students apply ED or EA?

- **Lack of information** – This is a particular problem in students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- **Procrastination**
- **Hesitancy to commit** to a particular school
- **Financial Aid** –
 - It is generally accepted that ED and EA schools will let you out of your obligation to attend if the financial offer is not adequate.
 - That said, no school will squeeze applicants who have shown loyalty by applying early.
 - Also, if you show them that the other schools have been far more generous, they may enhance their offer to keep you.



Suggested Strategy

If you are a good student, with academic criteria in the upper part of the middle 50% for your top choice school, and you have a strong application in the other areas we discuss, consider applying ED, EA or Rolling Admission.



The Application

- Three Main Parts (plus one)
 - Academics
 - Extracurriculars
 - Personal
 - The “uniqueness” factor



Academics

- Every admissions officer will tell you that the school transcript (not the GPA *per se*) is the most important part of the application.
 - Colleges get official school reports and maintain their own databases. They know how hard individual courses are at specific high schools.
 - It is important to score well in challenging courses. Getting an “A” in “basket weaving” does not help you and may signal the admissions committee that you are not willing to challenge yourself.
 - That said, be careful not to overload your schedule with so many challenging courses that your academic performance suffers. This is especially true during first semester of Senior year. Admissions committees want to see that you have maintained or improved your grades.



Academics

- Class rank is a “threshold “ phenomenon. Being “5th” in your class is not better than being “10th” in your class.
- Highly selective schools will consider a top 20% performance at a challenging school (like Eastside) as equivalent to a top 10% rank at a less challenging program.
- Many highly selective colleges recalculate the GPA using their own criteria and weighting.



A Common Myth

- *“I am valedictorian of my class and I have a 2400 on the SAT. Therefore, I should be accepted everywhere!”*
 - The reality is that Harvard has more valedictorian applications each year than spots in the freshman class. Yet, most students accepted are not valedictorians.
 - Also, they accept less than half of those applicants with 2400 SAT scores.
 - Conclusion: There is a lot more to college acceptance, at highly selective schools, than GPA and SAT.



Prepare for the SAT or ACT

- **Test prep services** (such as Kaplan or Princeton Review) can add 100 points to your combined score but expect to pay \$1000 for the course. Tip: Check for \$100 online coupons.
- **Private tutors** are very expensive and can cost \$2000-\$4000 and up.
- **Test Prep Books** can duplicate the “practice” boost of the prep services, without spending the money. Buy them for \$25-\$50 at local bookstores. Check with **Amazon** for used test prep books with prices less than \$10.
- **Free SAT prep on line:**
 - <http://www.majortests.com/sat/>
 - <http://www.proprofs.com/sat/>
 - <https://www.khanacademy.org/sat>
- **Retaking the SAT/ACT** - Retaking the SAT may also add up to 50 points to each score. Most schools will let you combine SAT/ACT sections to get the **best composite score**.
 - Were you sick during the test? Did you have a recent family emergency such as death, illness, divorce? If so, consider retaking the test. This means you should schedule the first attempt early enough for a retake.



Academics , SAT/ACT

- Test Scores

- Transcripts, not test scores, tell schools about your ability to do high level work.
- Most highly selective schools use test scores for corroboration of, or explanation of, grades.
 - A valedictorian with a perfect GPA at local rural high school scored a 1200 on the SAT. Implication? Not a challenging program.
 - Alternatively, a student with a high GPA challenging courses at a tough program (like Eastside) who has lower ACT/SAT scores may be identified as a “soft tester”.



Academics, SAT/ACT

- Test Scores
 - SAT/ACT scores may be fading in importance. Over 800 schools don't require them. Some of these are Selective or Highly Selective schools.
 - Bowdoin (1), Bates (1), Denison (2+), Dickinson (2+), Gettysburg (2), Middlebury (1), Mount Holyoke (2+), Sarah Lawrence (2), Wake Forest (1), Wheaton (2+)
 - Total of 815 schools: <http://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>
 - Most highly selective colleges usually don't give course credit for courses taken at local colleges or for high AP/IB scores. However, they will use these test scores for placement in their own higher level courses.



New SAT?

- Starting March 2016, the SAT will change again.
- This change **will not** affect current applicants.
- We return to a 1600 total score. Reading/writing will be combined.
- No guessing penalty!
- Available on the computer and in print.
- There will be no explicit vocabulary (only context based).
- There will be more “analysis” and “knowledge” questions and fewer “aptitude” questions.
- It sounds like it will be more like the ACT.



Extracurricular/Community Service

- You must do ***something*** other than class work to be considered at any highly selective school (unless you have an good reason like family obligations/health issues).
- It is better to do 1-3 things with commitment, passion and creativity than to do 20 things poorly.
- Sports, drama and music are very important and make your application stand out.
- Community Service – a must!



Extracurricular/Community Service

- Highlight (don't hide) factors which may have affected your ability to perform or engage in activities.
 - Did you overcome obstacles? These can explain a lack of extracurricular activities or a dip in GPA. Did you have:
 - financial problems requiring student work,
 - childcare responsibilities,
 - family or personal illness or disability,
 - divorce, death of a parent
 - bias – ethnic, religious, sexual preference



Personal Message

There are three ways that you can convey to the admissions committees who you are as a person:

- **Teacher recommendations** – can be very helpful, however...
 - It is difficult to write dozens of unique, personalized letters.
 - Their value depends on the teacher and how well they know you.
- **Interviews** – can be helpful, however...
 - The interview value depends on the interviewer.
 - Usually these are the student's first interviews so poor preparation usually means poor performance. => PREPARE!
 - Most schools don't request or require them.



Personal Message

- **Personal Essay**

- This is the most important part of the application after the transcript. It is also the least understood
- You are “speaking” directly to the admissions committee. Who are you? What makes you tick?
- If you are light on extracurriculars due to illness or family obligations, this is one way to express that (although not the only way since many application questions inquire about work experience).
- Read “On Writing the College Application Essay – Secrets of a Former Ivy League Admissions Officer, the Key to Acceptance at the College of Your Choice,” by Harry Bauld.



Personal Essay

- Consider that most admissions officers read hundreds of these. Most essays are **dry** and **boring**. Try to be creative, entertaining, different.
- **Spelling and grammar** must be **perfect!**
- **Tone:**
 - Avoid grandiosity – You are NOT the most spectacular student these schools have ever seen.
 - “Mature and introspective” is okay
 - “Somewhat cheesy but tasteful” is okay
 - Mildly jocular is okay but avoid a silly tone.
 - Be politically correct! - “I think smokers are disgusting,” won’t go over well if the admissions officer happens to smoke (or if her father died of lung cancer.)
- Try to have a **“hook”** so that the officer will remember your essay.



Personal Essay - Topics

- Don't write about these ("On Writing the College Application Essay...", by Harry Bauld):
 - **The trip** – "I had to adjust to a whole new way of life."
 - **My favorite things** - puppy dogs, freedom, and Mrs. Field's cookies
 - **Miss America** – "I think World Peace is the most important issue facing us today"
 - **The Jock** - "Though wrestling I have learned to set goals and to work with people."
 - **The autobiography** "Hello, my name is ..."
 - **Tales of my success** "But, finally, when I crossed the finish line..."
 - **Pet Death** – "As I watched Buttons' life ebb away, I came to value..."
- More bad topic ideas:
 - "My late grandfather was the most important person in my life" – your grandfather is not applying
 - "I was inspired by my summer helping poor people in Guatemala" - rich kid takes a summer vacation.



Letters of Recommendation and Supporting Materials

- Be respectful of your teachers and guidance counselors. Don't wait until right before the due date to request letters or transcripts. You are not the only student applying!
- Don't inundate the admissions committees with supporting materials and don't expect to get anything back. (Never send originals.) Provide only what they ask for: usually video for sports, audio or video for music or jpeg for art.



The Interview

- Is the interviewer a “gatekeeper” or an “information conduit”?
- Is the interview “contentious” or “friendly”?
- Preparation (check many online sites for college interview prep)
 - Research the school!!! Make specific references to programs or faculty. Explain why their program would be a good fit for you.
 - Why do you want to attend? Reputation/location is not enough
 - Talk about specifics. Sell yourself but don’t brag.
 - Bring a Resume
 - Dress appropriately unless you are coming right from a sports practice – then politely “apologize”.



The Interview

- Anticipate Questions:
 - Background: birthplace, primary language, occupation of parents, family situation, legacy, siblings, obstacles overcome.
 - Academic interests, predicted area of concentration, career goals
 - Extracurricular activity, community service
 - Current Events
 - Recent books read
 - Love of learning, intellectual curiosity and originality



How are you unique?

- Highly Selective Schools usually have admissions officers talk about student applications around a table.
- Some “objective only” schools make decisions by using a computer program to create an “index” for admission. Admission is based on the index “cutoff”.
- After all of the grades, extracurriculars, and essays, the question asked is, “Okay, this applicant is clearly a great student and a well rounded, amicable person. Now, why should we accept him or her?”



How are you unique?

Did you:

- Start a business or organization?
- Write a book or play, create a work of art?
- Develop a new idea or invent something?
- Distinguish yourself in sports or the arts?



The “Kiss(es) of Death” in College Applications

- **The wrong school!** If a college asks, “Why do you want to come to our school?”, “XYZ University” and you accidentally mention “ABC University” in the response, you will be summarily rejected! – per Princeton (1), Vanderbilt (1) and others.
- **Give them (only) what they ask for.** If the school asks for two letters of recommendation and you submit 23 letters, you will be summarily rejected. – per Yale (1). Students who can’t follow directions raise their own **red flags**.
 - Three letters may be okay but you are on “thin ice”.
 - If they ask for teacher letters and you submit one from “Coach Smith” or “Minister Jones”, who never taught you, the “ice” gets even thinner!
- **No Stalking!** Do **NOT** call the admissions office twice a week to check on your application. I have personally known a local student who rejected at Yale (1) for this very reason.



Write a Resume

- Bring a resume to the interview and send it to the schools
 - A resume provides a quick summary for the admissions officer. You will keep and update this resume for the rest of your career.
 - A resume allows for items not covered in the regular application.
 - All private high schools help their students write resumes. Why should those students have an advantage in this area?
 - All college career offices help their students write resumes.
 - Your resume should be concise. Most high school students only need one page.



Summary – Admission to a Highly Selective College

- Apply to Selective or Highly Selective colleges to:
 - Increase lifetime earnings
 - Lower educational costs for most families
 - Experience diversity in people and ideas
 - Develop your talents
- Obtain a four year degree instead of a two year degree
- Consider Early Decision, Early Action or Rolling Admission
- Start the process early – avoid a last minute rush
- Request letters of recommendation and transcripts early
- Give admissions committees exactly (and only) what they ask for
- Parents: Fill out the FAFSA in early January!



Summary – Admission to a Highly Selective College

- Address the three main areas of the application: **Academics, Extracurricular Activities** and **Personal Statement**
 - Identify a uniqueness factor
 - Prepare a resume
 - Prepare for the interview
 - Perfect your essays in spelling, grammar, subject and tone

